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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

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FEATURING

THE ASSISTANT SELF

An Amazing Short Novel

By F. L. WALLACE

THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

THE ENVIRONMENTAL VISTAS which will go careening, hop-scotching, plummeting and soaring in kaleidoscopic fashion past the central axis of man's investment in the future will continue to confirm, by their variety alone, that the most powerful prime mover at work in the universe of stars is the law of change. But however wild and incredible such scenic vistas may become—and they could just as easily unroll on Mars as on the farthest planet of the farthest star—Man himself will confront them very much as he is today.

Oh, there will be minor changes, of course. His cranial capacity may expand and his jaw diminish and his jumbo-sized egotism may be channeled a bit, and he may become less warlike and more creative, and he may not be thrown into pandemonium by every daring new departure from the traditional order of things.

But it's a reasonably safe bet that the three major human types will survive with all of their cleavages intact until the stars fall out of the sky.

Cleavage—from *cleaver*, presumably. Or is it the other way about? Anyway, a cleaver would be a delightful peg upon which to hang our hat as we pause to draw a breath in the frigid, vaporous-green atmosphere of this month's arresting cover illustration.

True, the jolly Falstaffian gentleman in the foreground, that glorious and Gargantuan cook, is holding a fork and not a cleaver. But it could just as appropriately be a cleaver, because you can't roast a fine specimen of mutton without first trimming it down a bit. But not to stray from the main point—the jolly gentleman is in all respects a magnificent representative of the buoyant, irrepressible fat man type.

Just look at the expression on his face! He's having the time of his life. No worrier he, but a man of girth and substance, a brother to the universe.

But in the background? There we have a different story, for those space-helmeted figures moving into the shadows are aggressive explorer types, rugged, muscular lads who will in all probability be short-lived. And inside the spaceship, invisible to us, a third human type sits brooding. He's the cerebral type, a formidably creative individual who probably planned the whole expedition, but who now sits in tight-lipped torment worrying his head off and wishing he were somewhere else.

Brains, brawn and jolly good nature. You get the picture? It takes the best efforts of all three types to keep the universe spinning.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 5, No. 2. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues $3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y.
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The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)

SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA

the assistant self

by . . . F. L. Wallace

It was a world of Utopian dreams and industrial strife — buffeted by the winds of human unreason. But Hal Talbot was a man apart.

"YOU ALWAYS SEE the other person's side," said Laura. "Even the boss's, especially when he fires you."

She swept the compact into her purse and stood up. "Now see if you can understand *my* point of view." With a withering contempt in her eyes she swung the purse to her shoulder and walked rapidly away.

Hal Talbot stared morosely at his drink. The worst of it was—he knew exactly how she felt. In spite of what everyone professed to believe empathy was a dreadful handicap. He had more than his share of it, and he couldn't even hold down a simple lousy job.

He raised the glass and saw through it a man—a total stranger —standing beside the booth in amused expectation. *The hell with him,* Talbot thought. He drank the beer and set the glass down.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" the stranger asked.

Talbot looked him over carefully. He was well-dressed—too well-dressed—and he conformed in vir-

Sympathy for others may be one of the seven cardinal virtues. But man does not live by virtue alone, and a superabundance of any one attribute—however admirable in itself—can lead to stark tragedy. To appreciate fully the breadth of that tragedy you must follow in the footsteps of F. L. Wallace as he scatters golden nuggets of science fantasy entertainment along the frontiers of tomorrow with a prodigality undreamed of by lesser scribes. Here is a yarn that takes you straight into realms of abiding mystery and surmise.

tually every other respect to the popular conception of the executive, suave and so completely sure of himself. Therefore—he probably wasn't.

"Suit yourself," grunted Talbot.

The man sat down and ordered for both of them. It was all right with Talbot. He *could* have paid for the drinks, but he was keenly aware that his dwindling resources wouldn't last long.

"I couldn't help overhearing the conversation," said the man.

"We have all our fights in public," said Talbot, with embittered irony. "It makes things more final."

The stranger stared at him steadily for an instant, his brows contracted. Then he asked: "Are you sure this is final?"

"You heard what she said. I can't hold a job."

"That's precisely what I mean. You seem capable enough. I'm curious as to the reason."

Talbot looked at the other more intently. He was a man of much the same general build as Talbot, but he appeared to be five or six years older.

"I mean no offense," said the man. He fumbled in his pocket and held out a card.

Talbot took it. There was a single word in bold black letters on one side: TRANSPORTATION. The crosses on the T's were spaceships. On the other side was a name: EVAN SOLERI, *vice-president in charge of research.* Talbot curled his fingers around the card.

The man smiled. "Just call me Evan."

"All right, Evan. You're going to offer me a job." Talbot settled back comfortably. Things were falling into the routine pattern again.

"Perhaps. But first—do you mind telling me why you keep getting fired?"

"I don't mind," said Talbot. He was used to impertinent and stupid questions. He was used to getting jobs in odd places and to the ups and downs that always seemed to straighten themselves out eventually. Some day perhaps he'd find himself in a situation from which all his empathy couldn't rescue him. But he'd worry about that when it came.

"You want to know why I get fired?" he asked, drawing the beer to him, and scowling across it. "Well, I'll tell you. I meet someone like you. We talk, and are friendly. First thing you know he is offering me a job. I take it. In the beginning everything's fine. I have a knack of knowing exactly what he wants. I get a raise practically overnight.

"Then one day *his* boss comes in and wants something in a hurry. So he talks to me very earnestly about it. Before anyone realizes what has taken place his boss is depending on me instead of on him. So what can he do? He finds some pretext and fires me."

Evan Soleri nodded. "And you don't object?"

"I get mad, naturally," said Talbot. "But what else *could* he do?

He's worked hard for the job and I come along and threaten to take it away. The point is—I've got no special qualification."

"Except empathy."

"Except that," agreed Talbot. He took a long drink and set the glass down. "It's funny. I get along well with people but my adjustment index isn't so good."

"I've been thinking about that," said Soleri. "Do you mind showing me your employment card?"

"Sure—step number one," said Talbot. "When do I start?" He handed over the card, and waved to the waiter for refills in the same motion.

Soleri frowned at the card. "I notice you haven't been tested in seven years. Why haven't you gone back for re-evaluation?"

"It costs money," Talbot replied. "Anyway, aptitudes don't change much after twenty-four."

"That's usually true," said Soleri, returning the card.

"When do I start?" said Talbot. "To save trouble shall I have them make out the termination notice at the same time? They can safely date it two months in advance. I usually last that long."

"You may be surprised." Soleri smiled. "I've a feeling you can work well at the top. You've been starting too low."

Talbot studied the executive. Curiously enough, he had the same feeling—if he ever got to the top. It was hard to do on ability alone. He never lasted long enough for anyone to find out how good he was. "What sort of work am I supposed to do?" he asked.

"Interested?" said Soleri. "Have you heard of the perfect rocket motor?"

"I've heard of it. Everybody has." Talbot disposed of the beer. "It's out of my line, though. I'm strictly business administration."

"Don't prejudge what I have in mind," said Soleri. "Have you also heard of Fred Frescura?"

"The heat scientist?"

"That's right. The *foremost* heat and rocket scientist." Soleri moved the glass aside. "As you know, present rockets are pretty poor. They take us around the solar system, but that's all. And they don't do that very well. Anyway, there's mathematical proof that the theoretically perfect rocket motor can be built. We've been working on it for the past six years."

"Why come to me?" said Talbot. "I can't help."

"Don't be so sure. We want your empathy."

"You can have it," said Talbot. "Look. One point five on the card, maybe actually one point four by now. It levels off. You know the standard curve as well as I do."

"The standard curve doesn't always fit. That's what I want to discuss."

Talbot might have stayed to talk it over, but he caught a strong surge of panic from the executive. Panic or trouble—or both. He didn't want either. He had quite enough of his

own. It wasn't every day he lost his job and his girl walked out on him.

"I don't feel in the mood for hashing this over," he affirmed. "You're expecting a woman anyway."

Soleri smiled quizzically. "See? I told you that you're underestimating the strength of your empathy."

"Nothing to it. You were looking at every pair of legs that came by."

"I don't think it was that easy. Why don't you wait? Randy will be here any minute."

Talbot shook his head. "There's no telling what Laura will do when she wanders out like this. She won't go home, that's for sure."

"I wish you'd reconsider."

"You can't get a test tonight," argued Talbot. "And a test is the only thing that will give us real information. I know what you're going to suggest—that I come in tomorrow morning. Fine. So I'll do it—tomorrow morning."

Again Soleri smiled. "I said that you were my man. Now I'm sure of it. Will you come in early, at seven thirty, say?"

Talbot could feel the other's panic diminish. Maybe he was even better than he thought—if he could produce that effect just by agreeing. "Seven thirty is pretty early," he said.

"There's a reason for it," Soleri assured him.

"I bet."

Soleri took out a card and scribbled some careful directions on it. "Here," he said. "Come in this way. Just walk right in. There won't be anyone there at that hour of the morning except me."

"Sure." Talbot stuffed the card in his pocket and wandered over to the screen booth. He had trouble getting the connection, but when he did her father answered.

He had been correct in his assumption. He came out of the booth and stood for an instant at the bar, gulping down a drink. His head turned to follow the progress of a woman who had just entered the cafe. She had deep brown eyes and blonde hair, and a great deal more. That helped. She was not only pretty—she was spectacular. He liked spectacular women.

She went on by, and stopped at the booth occupied by Soleri. Quite obviously she was Randy. For a moment he regretted his decision to go in search of Laura. But only for a moment. Common sense told him he wouldn't have a chance of taking a woman like that away from a vice-president of TRANSPORTATION. The company just happened to be the largest in existence.

Still, it felt good to have a man of Soleri's importance seek him out. He rolled the thought around in his mind. It was unquestionably true. Soleri had come looking for him. He knew it the way he knew so many things—without thinking, by feeling alone, by the ability to put himself in another's place.

By the time the thought had come full circle in his mind Randy and Soleri were gone. It was Laura now—or nothing.

He went in search of her. She was not in any of the bars she usually frequented. She was nowhere. There could be no doubt that she was mad at him this time, and would be for weeks—even when she learned what he had coming up. She wanted to get married and was furious with him for daring to put her off.

It took him quite a while to become absolutely convinced he wasn't going to find her on what remained of his time, money, and drinking capacity. He started home and Laura slipped out of his mind.

It certainly wasn't accidental—his meeting with Soleri. Soleri had been looking for him. But why? How had he known where to look? Talbot couldn't concentrate solidly on the problem. It was all he could do to figure out where the street was going to sway to next.

One thing was certain. He'd have a lot of questions to ask Soleri in the morning.

II

TALBOT dressed numbly. It was early, damned early, and his head throbbed. Aside from the physical discomfort involved he didn't mind a hangover. He was more sensitive when he hung one on.

He was going to need that sensitivity when he talked to Soleri. The man had a pretty phenomenal empathy index himself—say about 0.95. The more he thought about it the more certain he became that it must be at least 0.95. The executive had displayed uncanny acumen the night before.

Talbot swung a rack out of the closet and automatically selected a light conservative suit. Soleri would expect him to dress conservatively. He didn't care what Soleri thought, but it was a matter of pride with him to fit neatly into any situation.

He dialed a cup of coffee, and then on second thought changed it to two cups, and gulped both of them. He studied his reflection in the mirror. It would do. He was the perfect picture of the successful executive. All he lacked was success.

He resisted the impulse to phone Laura. He was convinced she wouldn't answer at seven in the morning. Probably she wouldn't answer later in the day. Maybe in a week he'd call her *after* he got the job with TRANSPORTATION.

He went down and hailed an aircab which took him to the far side of the city. He alighted and read for the third or fourth time the instructions Soleri had written on the card. He located the entrance without difficulty and went in. Normally, he supposed, there would be a receptionist in the lobby. He didn't see one. It was not important, for Soleri had cleared the way for him.

He ascended three flights of

stairs, walked around a turn at the corridor, and there he was—in front of Soleri's office. It would be just his luck to find that he had arrived too early. But there was definitely someone in the office. He conquered his trepidation and went in.

Soleri smiled and came toward him from behind the desk. His hand was extended and he was laughing. It was friendly laughter, and Talbot could sense the friendliness. But he was unemployed, and for that reason he resented it.

"My God," said Soleri. "If we looked anything alike we'd be twins."

Talbot stared intently, reviewing and adding to his original impressions of the other. They were within an inch and a pound of each other. Moreover they now wore identical suits and identical shoes and if there was a difference in their ties and shirts, it would have taken an expert to detect it. Talk about empathy! Soleri really had it.

But actually they didn't resemble each other at all. Soleri's hair was black, and Talbot's was brown. Soleri's eyes were dark, Talbot's gray. Viewed from the back with a hat on they were indistinguishable. But face to face no one could have mistaken one for the other.

"It's an impressive trick," Soleri chuckled. "If you're trying to convince me you're good—relax. I believe it."

"I'm not trying to convince you of anything," said Talbot.

Soleri looked at him keenly. "You probably aren't," he said. "It ties in."

Talbot blinked. "Are you saying it's *my* empathy? One point four or five isn't *that* good. Your own index must be zero point ninety-five."

"How did you know?" said Soleri. "I never told you."

"Why—" began Talbot, and stopped. How *had* he known? It was one thing to think you knew, quite another to be always right. Something was startlingly out of place.

Empathy measurements started in adolescence. Before then the body was in a state of flux. It was still building, exploring. It did not have the experience on which to base valid opinions.

The adolescent was primarily aware of himself. He scarcely knew why he thought and felt the way he did, and had no time to encompass the emotions of others. But as he matured and some of his own problems became settled, an increasing awareness grew in him. He became better able to anticipate and participate in the feelings of others. Not merely to react to them, but to feel them as if they were his own.

After adolescence the ability to identify with others continued to increase—rapidly at first, and then more slowly. Plotted out as age against understanding, the curve resembled an hyperbola reaching for the asymptote.

Soleri smiled. "I see you've fig-

ured it out for yourself. We don't think you're usual either. A test will decide the matter."

"The test can come later. Who's 'we'?"

"Myself and Randy, my secretary."

Inwardly Talbot sighed. He could hardly blame the guy. With a secretary like that he couldn't picture himself spending much time in an office either. Evidently Soleri and Randy didn't. No doubt Soleri would claim that last night's meeting had come under the heading of business as usual.

"Another thing," he said. "How did you know I'd be at that bar?"

Soleri shook his head in humorous resignation. "You don't let much get by you. To be wholly frank, that's why we want you. Well, if you must know, we called your apartment several times in the last few days. You were never home. So we put plant protection on you. It's outside their normal jurisdiction, but they learned your habits quickly enough."

"I don't like to be snooped at," protested Talbot. "I don't even know how you got my name."

"That one's easy," said Soleri. "Several years ago you filed an application with us. I looked it over recently. I'm a mathematician—an amateur but fairly good. I decided that if you'd put down the various empathy measurements correctly you might be better than you thought. Over a short portion of the curve, you know, a cubic or another equation can resemble an hyperbola. After Randy gets here we'll see."

Talbot nodded. He could accept that. It helped to explain why he'd had so much trouble. People resented his competition. The thought gave him confidence, and he reached out easily for the next conclusion.

"But you're not being altruistic about this," he said. "I may have an index of zero point nine, better than yours, way at the top of the executive class. But for all you know I may have no knowledge, no subject matter in my head." He paused to formulate the thought clearly. "You want me for something else. Specifically you're in trouble."

"We may not need that test. But we'll take it anyway," said Soleri. "Yes, it's trouble. Do you want to see if you can tell me what it is?"

Talbot didn't so much think as contact Soleri's personality. He knew that atomic energy was advanced and with it almost any degree of temperature could be attained. And the hotter the exhaust, every other factor being equal, the faster the rocket. He allowed the thought to float closer.

"The technical problem is liners," he said. "You've got to have something that won't be melted or eroded by the exhaust."

"True," said Soleri. "Metal or ceramics won't do—not at the temperatures we're working with. We have made certain mathematical in-

vestigations which indicate there *is* a solution. Metal plus certain energy states might turn the trick.

"We can discuss techniques later. It's sufficient for now that we've narrowed it down to a matter of trial and error. The rest should be easy enough: a million or so experiments and we'll have it. We've hired the best brains in the field, and you can be sure we haven't spared time or money. Only we aren't making progress. The perfect rocket motor should drive us at—or near—the speed of light. We're nowhere near that."

Talbot leaned on the desk. "Competition?" he asked thoughtfully.

Soleri smiled painfully. "Perhaps. We're big, but we're not the only company after the motor. The difficulty arises from the fact that there's nothing definite we can point to as wrong. If there was, plant protection would find the person or persons responsible and put an end to the obstruction in short order. What happens is simply this. Costly experiments have one insignificant detail wrong, and blow up or fail to function at all. Elaborate computations have one decimal point moved and it takes a month to locate the impediment. Who's behind it? What official or worker is out to sabotage us?" That's what we're trying to discover."

"Did it ever occur to you that the perfect rocket motor may be an illusion? Perhaps it can't be built."

"We have Frescura to say otherwise. Rocket construction is his life's work. Other experts in the field agree with him—though they are not always able to follow his theoretical explanations."

"I won't argue with them," said Talbot. He glanced uneasily at the door of the office. A breeze was blowing it open slightly. "I see now why you wanted me to come so early. It was to make sure I wouldn't be seen?"

"Right," Soleri said. "I wanted to explain the situation and have you leave before the regular shift gets here. I'll make arrangements for the test to be given outside the plant. When you come back you'll be hired through regular channels. That way there'll be no apparent connection with me. You'll simply be given a position in the shop. It will be high enough to enable you to meet everyone, but it won't be so top-level that you'll be prevented from mingling freely."

"I'm not sure I'm interested," said Talbot. "If I'm as good as you think I am—why should I take a job like that?"

"It's temporary, don't you see? With your degree of empathy you can track down the trouble without arousing suspicion. After that we'll put you where you belong. And your salary will be scaled to your test rating from the beginning, regardless of your workshop status. How does that sound to you?"

"Forthright," said Talbot. "And quite generous." He didn't like to

snoop any better than he liked being snooped at. But he'd listen.

"Randy's due any moment," said Soleri. "Let's see that employment card again."

Talbot reached for his wallet. The container the card was in didn't detach easily. He opened it, and handed the wallet to Soleri.

Soleri examined the card with interest. He made a rough sketch of it on paper, plotting the points of the series of tests and joining them with a free-hand curve. He was so intent on the task that he failed to notice that the office door had opened the width of a man's hand.

Talbot wouldn't have noticed either, had he not turned at that precise instant to get a better view of the sketch and seen the hand in the crack. The hand threw a small dark object on the floor, then whipped back quickly. The door closed.

Talbot's reactions were good but not good enough. He jogged Soleri's elbow. "What's that?" he said uneasily, indicating the object.

It was round and dark, hard to distinguish on the floor. It took Soleri a second to see it—a second too long. "Get down," he shouted, shoving Talbot behind the desk.

The action threw Soleri off-balance and he fell the wrong way. He scrambled frantically for the protection of the desk but only his hand with the wallet still in it reached the merciful shadow.

A chaotic sound echoed somewhere near Talbot. He'd never heard anything like it. He didn't have time to wonder where it came from because it was followed by another louder sound.

Instinctively he closed his eyes as an incandescent sheet of flame whipped across the room. It was accompanied by a vast thermal concussion which blotted out all sound. Take a tiny piece of the interior of the Sun—not the center, but somewhere between that and the visible outer portion—and wrap it with unimaginable insulation. Transport it to an office and strip away the covering in a microsecond. Within a limited area the explosion was even more frightful than that.

At first the desk shielded Talbot. In the intolerable light paint and pictures were burned from the wall. Chairs disappeared and the fireproof floor bubbled and vaporized. By the time the thick steel and thermoplastic desk collapsed in ashes around Talbot's body the tiny speck of matter had dissipated most of its energy and there was only fire to fear.

Clouds of steam came from the ceiling as the sprinkler system went into action. It didn't function well because most of it had been melted away in the first blast. Nevertheless water gushed out and turned to steam.

Talbot struggled to get out. But he was badly burned. Steam and smoke were searing his lungs, and a section of the ceiling had peeled off and fallen on his legs, pinning

him to the floor. He saw a hand, all that was left of Soleri, clutching the wallet. And then he couldn't breathe, couldn't see or feel anything at all.

III

A DIM, slender figure swirled dizzily in front of him. He hoped she was a nurse, but he could only see the flowing whiteness of her as she moved to the door. "You can come in, Miss Farrell," she said.

Miss Farrell came in. She was better known to Talbot as Randy, and close up she was even more breathtaking than when he had first seen her. His vision was steadying a little now.

"Just a few minutes — not longer," the nurse cautioned.

Randy sat down beside him, touching his face lightly. He could feel the gentle pressure of her fingers through the bandages. "Don't try to talk," she said. "I'll say everything that has to be said. And it won't take long."

He blinked in grateful understanding. It wasn't a wholly satisfactory form of communication, but her nearness soothed him.

"We haven't found out how that thermal capsule got there," she said. "We know it was hot, however. It had a temperature of at least a half million degrees, despite its extreme smallness. After you get well enough to talk freely we'll try to reconstruct what happened."

He nodded slightly, and the effort sent a wave of pain coursing through him.

"So much for that," she said. "You'll get well. There won't even be scars. You're lucky. Did you know it?"

He knew it. But he knew also that it wasn't *only* luck. Soleri had saved his life at the expense of his own.

Then she said an incredible thing. "All we found of the other poor devil was his lower arm. The card was still clutched in his hand. It was scorched but not burned. I gave it to one of our mathematicians and he has worked out two curves that might fit. The man was everything you said he was—and more. I wish he'd lived."

Talbot closed his eyes in stunned protest. She was making a mistake, a crazy utterly incomprehensible mistake. He tried to tell her—but there was only a gurgle in his throat.

"Don't bat your eyes at me," she said in mock reproof. "It's true. The lowest empathy index registered is zero point eight. Right? Well, this man was zero point five. The mathematician couldn't be sure, but he *thought* it might be even lower."

She brushed the hair away from her lovely eyes. "Perhaps I should have kept it to myself. No one could possibly have the index the curve indicated. There are limits to human credulity."

Again he tried to tell her that it was Soleri who had died. Soleri!

But the bandages were too tight and his weakness too overwhelming.

But how could she have made such a mistake? True, he'd been wearing the same clothing as Soleri and the dead man had been clutching his employment card. But a woman who had been close to Soleri, who had seen him every day, would surely know—

She leaned over, brushing her lips against his eyes. "Don't worry," she said. "I disposed of the remains —and put him on the payroll. Roving assignment, reporting only to you. After six months we can arrange to make it appear that he was killed in an accident."

His eyes! She'd known Soleri well enough to remember that the dead man's eyes were dark, not gray. Women were never in error about things like that. He blinked frantically, but she failed to draw the correct conclusion.

"Why six months?" she smiled. "Because I have the company's interest at heart. Otherwise we'd have to pay the full death benefit. If he's on the payroll after six months the insurance company must assume the responsibility. His salary will be much less than the death benefit. He's dead. Nothing we can do will bring him back. We may as well save some money."

The logic was acceptable, but she had the wrong man. He groaned in frustration and the sound escaped as a muffled protest from his tortured and burned throat.

Instantly the nurse reappeared. "That's all, Miss Farrell. He'll rest better for knowing what happened. But I think you've told him enough."

Randy bent over. "Everything's all right," she whispered. "Get well."

And then the nurse found an unbandaged region on his right shoulder and jabbed him. He ceased to feel or hear anything.

It was that way for the next few days, a dim and shadowy routine which he was vaguely and occasionally aware of. From time to time he felt stronger but the nurse had a needle ready and always used it. They intended to make certain that he did not prematurely exert himself.

Finally a day came when the nurse wasn't there. It had apparently been decided that he was ready to rejoin the living. He lay motionless on the bed, staring down at his folded arms. His right hand was bandaged; his left was not. He raised both hands to his face. The bandages were fewer, lighter than before.

Sooner or later, he told himself, the bandages would have to come off. Then what? Then the truth would be known to everyone. Still, he wasn't in an enviable position. He had gone at such an early hour to Soleri's office that no one had seen him. He had only Soleri's word as to his honesty of purpose —and Soleri was dead. Randy had made things worse with her silly attempt to hush things up. He was

in a serious mess—and had no way of knowing what was going to come out of it.

He got up shakily. He had made up his mind. He must leave the hospital. He knew it was foolish, but that didn't stop him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and found to his relief that he could stand. He teetered precariously for an instant and then stood upright.

There was a closet on the opposite side of the room. He wobbled toward it, wrenched the door open. It contained a robe but no clothes. As he braced himself in the doorway he caught sight of his face in the mirror on the back of the door. His brow was gleaming with perspiration and his eyes glittered darkly in the expanse of white. The bandages would have to come off.

It was painful but not as bad as he had thought it might be. He found an edge and pried at the masklike plaster. The bandages came off in one piece. His raw skin burned as air came in contact with it. It stung and burned, but he scarcely noticed the pain.

He stared at his reflection.

Now he knew what Randy had refused to tell him because she didn't believe it herself. The empathy index of the man she supposed dead was not zero point five. It was much less than that.

It was zero.

And zero was identity.

The face looking back at him was not that of Hal Talbot. It was Evan Soleri. It was Evan Soleri even to the dark eyes and the stubble of black hair that was beginning to grow in on his burned scalp.

Talbot or Soleri, he went back to bed.

He lay very still. His mind raced back to the scene in the office. He had *thought* there were two sounds, the strange one slightly before the thermal explosion. But the first had not been a sound at all. He knew that now. It was Evan Soleri's mental reaction to the approach of death. No one else could have heard it—no one except a man whose empathy index was zero. It was the crisis that had brought out his latent ability. He had responded by recreating himself as the identity of a person a microsecond removed from extinction.

He had done this successfully—but what came next?

He had been thinking of escape. It was no longer possible. As far as his immediate future was concerned he *was* Evan Soleri. He might be able to prove otherwise. But it could be a dangerous undertaking. They might think he'd had his face surgically altered with the deliberate, prior intention of replacing Soleri.

Besides—well, he had liked Soleri. Without a second's thought Soleri had given his life for a man he hardly knew. Quite possibly the person who had tossed in the thermal bomb had meant to kill Talbot. But he owed the unknown assassin something for that too.

His face hardened. In his new

identity as Soleri he was in the best possible position to track down the assailant. Soleri had been powerful, wealthy, the head of the research department. The place to begin was right here, where it had started. He'd be Soleri.

Talbot-Soleri rang for the nurse. He'd been inactive long enough. He had no very definite plans, but he'd take care of things as they came up. The nurse came in. She stared at him in consternation.

"You are not supposed to sit up," she said. "And you must have been mad to take those bandages off. Here, I'll put them back."

He scowled at her, and she didn't come near. "Get Miss Farrell," he said. "Tell her I must see her at once."

"The doctor gave strict orders that you're not to be disturbed," said the nurse hesitantly. She paled as he returned her stare, for there was a dangerous light in his eyes.

"Get her," he demanded.

When Randy entered the room there was a moment of complete silence. She seemed stunned by his aspect of well-being.

"The miracle of medicine," he said dryly. "Randy, I want to look over the personnel records of everyone in the department. Please get them and bring them to me here."

"Everything?" She looked at him in amazement. "You went over the technical staff last week."

"It doesn't matter," he told her. "I've got some ideas I want to tie down." That was true, of course, but mostly he wanted to make sure he wouldn't slip up on anyone he was supposed to recognize. He'd get by anyway, naturally. He could always claim a slight loss of memory due to shock. But such a claim wouldn't inspire confidence—and he didn't want anyone to become suspicious.

"While you're at it bring the office staff too," he added. There was one person he'd have to know as much about as possible. Much of it wouldn't be in any file. But he'd worry about the intangibles later.

Randy plainly thought his request was foolish, but she complied. Soon files were wheeled to his bedside. That was the nice thing about being a big wheel in a big company, and no pun intended. Everything was handy. Even the hospital was inside the plant.

But there were also disadvantages. The company was so big that there was a lot to learn. Still, he had to begin somewhere. Randy undoubtedly thought some of his requests were strange, but she brought what he asked for. Though not eidetic, his memory was good. He began industriously to absorb the information. Names, faces, facts and diagrams settled firmly in his mind.

It was a lengthy, painful process. Sometimes he became confused as to his actual identity. Was he Talbot or Soleri? The thought occurred to him that he might never be able to step out of the character he had

consciously as well as unconsciously assumed.

There was no data on what might happen to him. None at all.

IV

ON THE day of his discharge his skin was still tender but the burns had healed. He felt weak but that was not surprising in view of the number of days he had spent in bed. The department managed without him and when difficulties developed he relayed brief orders through Randy. She was his buffer. He didn't want to take part in running the plant until he had more insight on Soleri.

He learned many things, but there were technicalities to be mastered which he was sure he could pick up faster on the outside. The doctor wanted to send a nurse with him but he refused, finally consenting to have Randy accompany him. Perhaps he was taking a needless risk. But he was convinced he could handle Randy.

It was dark when they left the factory hospital, and took the elevator to the roof. He leaned on Randy somewhat more than he had to. It was a pleasure and a distraction. But he remained on his guard notwithstanding.

Randy was not a secretary at all. The files had revealed that much. Soleri had been so anxious to find out what was holding up the project that he had hired a first-rate psychologist and had put her in a position where she could work without being suspected. The psychologist was Randy. She wouldn't fool easy. And that, in a sense, was a challenge. If he could get by her he could convince anyone.

An aircab was waiting. He leaned very close to her as she helped him in. He was almost sure that his empathy should tell him something and it did. Her eyes darkened, and she became obviously disturbed by his nearness. He settled back in the cab and waited.

The driver turned about, and asked: "Where to?"

He pretended not to hear. The driver repeated the question and Randy gave him the address. The information itself didn't tell him much but his sensitivity filled in the missing details. She had been to the apartment many times, and stayed late.

They didn't talk much on the way. The cab flitted over the city lights with a steady droning. He became uneasy. She too was sensing a strangeness in him. He regretted his decision to have her accompany him, and resolved to send her home as soon as he could reasonably do so.

They landed on the roof of a tall apartment building. She paid the driver and told him not to wait. No chance for subtlety there.

"I'm quite all right," he said as she helped him out. "It was just a momentary touch of dizziness."

"I know," she said. "But you're not going to get away. I intend

to make sure you're all right." And that was that.

Soleri's apartment was on the twentieth floor. It was elaborate and large, and furnished with exquisite taste. He approved of Soleri's taste—in more than one respect. He sat down and looked it over.

"Glad to be back?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Sit and rest. I'll punch dinner. Anything special?"

"Nothing special. Whatever you want." She touched his arm as she went into the kitchen. He wished she hadn't. He had enough to contend with without that.

Presently she came back. "We'll have something light and nourishing in a few minutes," she said.

She went to the recording system and began examining the calls that had come in during Soleri's absence. He had to remind himself that it was an absence. Officially Soleri hadn't died.

He watched her intently. He wished her eyes weren't brown and wonderful.

"Anything important?" he said with an effort.

"A message from Andrew Taft. I told him you were hurt but not badly. He wants you to visit him next week."

Andrew Taft was president of TRANSPORTATION. Everyone knew that. But there wasn't anything in the files to give him a lead as to the duration or extent of their friendship. Perhaps Soleri had known Taft from boyhood. He didn't want to put his newly acquired personality to such a severe test before he could be more certain of the facts.

"Make an excuse for me," he said.

She looked at him inquiringly. "Do you think you should? Eleanor will be there. She heard about the accident and is coming in from Mars."

He might have known there would be some such complication. Soleri was a powerful and attractive man and there had been more than one woman in his life. It was another unexpected pitfall, a further challenge to his wariness. He grimaced. "Eleanor's a nice girl but she means nothing to me," he said.

"Oh?" Randy's lips tightened. "Is that why you're going to marry her?"

At the moment he hated Soleri, empathy or not. If it had been at all possible he would have dropped the pretense. But he couldn't—and he had to depend solely on his abnormal sensitivity. He told Randy what she *wanted* to hear.

"You know how it is," he said blandly. "I've got to get that motor built. It's costing far more than we expected. Somebody's got to play company politics."

She seemed a trifle mollified. "You needn't tell me. I've had a thorough grounding in business psychology." She moved quickly past him. "Dinner's ready," she

said. "You've got to build up your strength—for company politics."

He would have preferred silence but Randy insisted on holding up both ends of the conversation. Nothing important was discussed, but it gave him a chance to break down her defenses, and get to know her better.

After dinner they sat over a drink, and talked. Much of his empathy was tied up in the difficult task of simply duplicating Soleri. He couldn't get through to her with the accuracy he would have liked. But he did succeed in turning the conversation from Eleanor. She was willing. After the first flash of hatred she was completely willing to forget the girl existed.

She looked at the clock. "Time for bed," she said.

It was awkward. He started to get up, avoiding her eyes. "I guess so," he said, letting her assist him, thrilled by her nearness.

There was nothing else he could do. She was attractive and he wanted her for himself. But she was desperately and unhappily in love with Soleri. He couldn't let her know.

"Randy," he whispered softly as she clung to him. Laura seemed suddenly unreal and very far away, and he wished he'd never heard of Eleanor.

Later he awakened to find her lying beside him, tense and still. She hadn't been sleeping. In a surge of apprehension he wondered if she had discovered the truth about him.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Is that why you're not sleeping?"

"Well, there is. I was thinking," she said. "It was what I saw when I ran into the office right after the explosion. The smoke was very thick and you were lying behind what was left of the desk. For an instant I wondered which one of you had died."

"How could you tell?" he said. "I was badly burned. My face—"

"Your eyes are brown," she said. "Brown. Anyway I knew. You *couldn't* die."

"Try to forget about it," he said. "That nightmare is over. I'm alive."

"And so is Eleanor."

He sighed, wishing again that he could tell her everything. But Soleri would never deny the romance-shattering reality that stood between them. "You've always known about her."

"So I have." She moved closer to him. "I'm content with this brief dream of happiness."

That was better. He caressed her lightly, tenderly. "It's all right," he said soothingly. "Nothing has changed between us."

"I know, darling," she murmured. He thought he heard her laugh before she went to sleep.

At last he fell asleep.

V

FOR the next few days Talbot was feverishly busy. Just what inner

drives had dominated Soleri and how would he have reacted to any given situation? What had been his precise relationships with the people Talbot would be meeting daily? Fortunately there was an accumulation of recorded calls and messages. He played and re-played them. He subscribed to a clipping service and pieced together a fairly complete account of Soleri's social activities.

There were other rewarding sources. He scanned minutes of TRANSPORTATION meetings. He examined financial statements to give himself another sidelight on the life he had usurped. Pictures, letters—even the apartment—added to his growing knowledge.

Handwriting presented no difficulty. He found Soleri's signature, and duplicated it on second trial. Soon he didn't even have to try—it became second nature to him to forge Soleri's name on letters and documents. Mannerisms came easily too. Ways of walking, the quick thoughtful smile that appeared at intervals, the clothes he wore and how he wore them—all these distinguishing characteristics he copied with little conscious effort. He was as much Soleri as another person could be.

He rested and regained his strength, painstakingly sharpening himself until he was ready. Randy appeared frequently on the call plate, keeping him informed of what went on at the plant. But she didn't return to the apartment. He would have rejoiced in her presence but he didn't ask her. It would have meant taking a dangerous, unnecessary risk.

Finally he went back to work, nodding cheerfully to the receptionist in the outer office as he turned left at the stairs. There was no trace of damage in his private office. It had been rebuilt and refurnished and was now exactly as he remembered it.

Randy came in at once, cool and beautiful. "I told Frescura you'd like to see him," she said. "He'll be in his lab until noon."

Frescura, the famous heat and rocket scientist! He'd have to handle that interview with care. He had no way of knowing how much technical information the man had imparted to Soleri.

"I'll see him but I hadn't planned on it until later," he said. It was a false statement, but there was no need to take her completely into his confidence.

"I'm sorry," she said with feigned meekness. "I was trying to anticipate."

He knew that she was actively hating him for Eleanor. He'd have to find some way to ease the tension. But at the moment other problems loomed more urgently. He became expediently stern.

"Forget the secretarial pose," he growled. "You're a psychologist. Your job is to find out who is resorting to deliberate sabotage in the plant. What does plant protection say about the thermal bomb?"

She met his gaze candidly. "Nothing. Anyone at all might have had access to the hall."

"Then we'll have to work at it from the other end," he said.

She laid a sheaf of papers on his desk. He knew they were documents of no great importance. "Shall I tell Frescura you won't be out?" she asked.

"I'll see him," he said.

She looked at him oddly, and turned to go.

"Randy."

"Yes?"

He didn't know exactly what to say, so he tried it out for sound. "I still want to find out why we're not getting the motor. But it's more than simple sabotage now. A man was killed—a man I regarded as a friend, even though I didn't know him well. We've got to find out who is responsible. That comes first. Do you understand?"

Her wonderful brown eyes regarded him steadily. She turned away. "I understand," she said.

"Keep it in mind," he said. He got up and went to see Frescura.

Fred Frescura was a big man with more hair on his face than on his head. He was nearly bald but his eyebrows and mustache were thick and black. He had an air of concentration and childlike enjoyment of his work. Neither impression, decided Talbot, was strictly accurate.

He crumpled a sheet of calculations as Talbot came in, and moved out from behind the desk. "I'm glad to see you," he said gruffly. "For a while we weren't sure whether you'd been cremated in the holocaust."

"It was more like an inferno," said Talbot. "I survived."

"So I see," said Frescura. "I tried to get to the hospital but Randy wouldn't let me in. For three days she camped in the corridor."

"She takes excellent care of me," acknowledged Talbot. He glanced at the desk and suddenly turned pale.

Frescura laughed reassuringly. "Don't worry. These capsules are harmless or *I* wouldn't be here." He picked up a few of the tiny black cylinders and juggled them casually. "I was just attempting a reconstruction. What size was the thermal capsule which you saw?"

Talbot touched the spheres gingerly. They were jet-black and fathomlessly unreflective. "This, I think," he said. "Or possibly this."

Frescura laid five of the capsules down, rolling the other two in his hand. "I'm afraid that doesn't help much," he said at last. "It depends, you see, on how thick the covering was, and we can only guess at that. Let's say the temperature was over a hundred thousand degrees."

The temperature didn't interest Talbot. He didn't care by how much he'd nearly been vaporized. "Why don't we use capsule material like this?" he said. "It ought to make a good tube liner."

Frescura's brows seemed to thicken and grow larger. "Are you

seriously suggesting that I start my experiments from the beginning? Four years ago I told you we couldn't use it. Now you act as if it's something new."

Talbot got out of the dilemma hastily. He regretted that he had not spent more time on the technical aspects. He'd tried to be thorough, but failures were never recorded as thoroughly as triumphs.

"It's a thought," he said, hoping the remark would pass for executive stubbornness. "Maybe we overlooked something."

"Maybe we *didn't,*" growled Frescura. "The thinnest skin we can make will hold a piece of matter at a hundred thousand degrees for ten minutes. If we make it two inches thick it will last twenty-nine minutes and fourteen seconds. Constructed out of this a liner that would do us any good would be a quarter mile in diameter at its widest section. Is that practical?"

"You might look into it again. You may have some new ideas," said Talbot. He had avoided stumbling badly—and he'd learned something, although he should have known it in advance. The thermal bomb had been made in the plant. He looked up quickly. "Just when did the technicians arrive that morning? How many were in early?"

"I went over that," said Frescura. "So did plant protection. At least fifty men were asked in ahead of their shift. Several came in without being asked. But none of them were near your office."

It was puzzling and significant. Soleri had been in charge for years with no attempt on his life *until he, Talbot, had been brought in.*

Talbot filed the fact away for future reference. Someone had known Talbot was going to come in that morning. Soleri had made it plain that Randy knew. But who else?

Whom besides Randy had Soleri talked to? He couldn't ask, but it was of vital importance. Whoever it was he had carefully manufactured the bomb in the laboratory, calculating the time by the thickness of the skin. That somebody had stuffed the capsule in his pocket and gone to Soleri's office. When only a few seconds remained, he had rolled it through the door, giving himself just enough time to escape. But who was he? Talbot had no idea.

He discussed the thermal bomb for a moment or two and then switched to the progress on the motor. He listened to Frescura, who was more than willing to talk. Soon, unless he could slide out of the invitation, he was going to have to answer some far more pointed questions from Taft.

Still discussing high, very high, and stellar temperature chemistry, they went into the main experimental shop. This gave Talbot the opportunity of meeting the men he was supposed to have worked with for several years. There was a great

difference between a picture and a page of statistics—even psychologically loaded statistics—and the man himself. He did a creditable job of imitating Soleri as he spoke to them. He had gone a long way toward merging with the dead man's personality. But there was always an incalculable risk involved in anything he might say or do.

Frescura stopped expectantly beside a large construction site enclosure. "This is the latest," he said in a hushed voice.

Talbot looked at the work in progress critically. He was still at sea as to its more technical aspects. "Is this the project we were working on before the accident?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Frescura replied. "I've mentioned the theory before. But the application is new."

Talbot was relieved. He wouldn't be expected to know much about it. "Go over it for my benefit," he urged. "Quite a bit has happened in the interval."

Frescura glanced at him queerly, and he regretted having made the request. "You ought to remember this," said the scientist. "Well, it's off the mainline of our experiments, but I thought we might get some constructive results. We make the tube of dissimilar metals, one jacketing the other. When it is heated we get a thermocouple effect. An electric charge is generated. The charge on the inside of the tube repels the exhaust molecules so that they don't actually come in contact with the inside surface. This reduces both heating and erosion."

Talbot rubbed his head. "I remember. Is it ready to go?"

"It is," said Frescura grimly. "But don't stand there unless you want another accident."

Talbot got out of the way hastily. He was blundering in practically every statement he made. There was far more to a person than personality, or his outward appearance. In Talbot's particular case knowledge was lacking—not textbook information, but intimate details that could be acquired only by working closely with the man he was impersonating. So far it hadn't been serious. But he'd have to watch himself.

Frescura moved a switch, and there was a rumble within the enclosure. A tiny, barely visible flame shot out a foot from where Talbot had been standing. The rumble rose to a shriek, and quickly passed beyond the range of hearing. The flame disappeared, but Talbot could still feel the heat.

Frescura picked up a wrench and tossed it into the path of the exhaust. The instrument vanished and the huge curved backstop a hundred feet away was suddenly coated with a thin film of molten metal. Frescura grinned at him.

"You've got to watch these things," he said. He peered into an eyepiece on the enclosure, making several adjustments before he seemed satisfied. "Take a look," he said to Talbot.

Talbot looked, his eyes gradually growing accustomed to the intense light that passed through the dense filters. He could see the inside of the rocket tube, and the fierce incandescence shooting by. Actually none of the exhaust gasses touched the walls of the tube, for there was a static area an inch in thickness next to the wall where nothing seemed to penetrate.

As he tried to see more clearly exactly what was happening the enclosure began to vibrate again, shaking the foundation. But the metal held. The shriek declined to a rumble and then the sound died away completely.

Talbot blinked and straightened up. Frescura was jotting down readings from the instruments on the enclosure. He made a few quick calculations. "The test corresponds to a rocket speed of thirty thousand miles a second," he said.

It was a long way from what they wanted, but it was about fifteen times better than anything that had been attained before. "Not bad," Talbot said, cautiously. "Maybe we should settle for this. One sixth the speed of light. Twenty-five years to the nearest star."

Frescura scowled at him. "Make it thirty," he said. "They've got to get up speed and slow down. Thirty to the star and thirty back. Sixty years for the round trip, not counting exploration time."

"I understand," Talbot said. "But with a young crew—boys not over twenty-two or three—it's possible to send a ship to the nearest star and reasonably expect it to return."

"They'll be eighty when they come back," said Frescura. "Their friends will all be dead."

"There are some lads who will volunteer—if the rewards are high enough."

"No doubt," said Frescura. "But there's one detail which prevents it—building a rocket motor which will last for more than a few seconds."

"You've already accomplished a great deal," said Talbot.

"This?" Frescura laughed. "No good at all. You saw what just happened."

"I did. You shut off the motor."

Frescura looked at Talbot with sour amusement. "It was the automatics that cut off the flow of fuel. Didn't you see it? The inner charge repelled matter, but it *couldn't stop radiation.* Radiation heated the tube. As it grew hot beyond a certain temperature the thermocouple charge diminished, intensifying the heat transfer to the tube. When it went, it fell apart in a hurry."

Talbot frowned. "There's no way around it?"

"None I know of. I'll keep trying of course. With another hundred million dollars we might make this work even though it's far from what we're after."

Talbot shook his head in admiration. Frescura tossed huge sums about with utmost ease. "Keep with

it," he said. "We've got to lick this or it will finish us."

"We'll come out on top," said Frescura optimistically.

Unfortunately Talbot didn't have the same confidence. "Economize where you can," he cautioned.

"There is no such thing as economy in research," Frescura affirmed.

"There had better be. We're running low. Accounting is beginning to ask questions. We'll have to go to the board of directors before long."

"I guess so. The accident cost plenty." Frescura leaned against the enclosure, rubbing it with unconscious affection. "If you need help, let me know. I'll add my weight to yours."

"I'll let you know," said Talbot as he walked away.

The trouble with Frescura was that he was a theoretical scientist, completely indifferent to cost. As he went through the plant he saw countless examples of waste. There was endless duplication, and the place seemed overstaffed. But, though he could undoubtedly reduce costs with efficient administration, that was not the most vital problem.

He had to locate and unmask a man who did not shrink from cold-blooded murder. It couldn't have been Soleri. A successful saboteur would not have sought out Talbot to help him. Neither would he have killed himself. And it could not have been Randy. The trouble had begun long before she had been hired. It wasn't Frescura, for he had not only initiated the project. He had pushed it through with all the influence at his command.

Taft was still unaccounted for. But he was the president of the company and it was inconceivable that he would launch a criminal conspiracy against his own interests.

Nevertheless Talbot made up his own mind. His extreme sensitivity was his most valuable weapon. He intended to find out just how far it would take him. He completed the tour of the plant and went back to the office.

He called Randy, and immediately took up the problem of Taft. "I still haven't answered his invitation," he told her.

Her eyes clouded. "I know," she said. "I'll notify the department heads that you won't be in the plant for a few days—beginning Wednesday."

"I'll be here," he said. "I want you to dream up an excuse why I can't go. Make it good. I trust your social sense."

"You can't do that," she protested. "Have you seen the latest statement from accounting?"

"I have. We'll need funds before long."

"You don't turn down an invitation from the president when you may need his help."

"You do when there are graver issues at stake. I've got to begin somewhere. The top is a good place."

"A dangerous place," she said.

"I'm not thinking about that."

"You'd better," she said. "Unless —have you got a cushion?"

"In a way," he said. "Somebody wants this project to fail, badly enough kill anyone who stands in his way. Good, we'll let it come close to failure. We'll see if there is any attempt made to interfere—"

"You're the boss," she shrugged. "I hope it works."

"It will."

He flung himself into his work for the remainder of the afternoon. Facts and figures went into his head and what came out was a reasonable duplication of what Soleri had known.

He finished late. Most of the office force had gone home. A few technicians were working in the shop. Tired and numb he took an aircab. Twenty moments later he was letting himself into his apartment. He wasn't imagining it. There was someone in the apartment. Still, Soleri would inevitably have visitors now and then. It was nothing to be afraid of. He went in.

Randy smiled at him. "Hello, darling," she said.

VI

FRESCURA got up hastily as he heard Taft's familiar voice in Randy's office. "I'll leave," he said, folding the sheet Talbot had just signed.

"Stick around," Talbot urged. "I'm sure he wants to see you." He hadn't thought Taft would come so soon, but he was not at all displeased. He was equally grateful for Frescura's presence, feeling confident that it would provoke some interesting reactions. But he was destined to be disappointed.

Frescura wriggled his thick mustache. "I came up to ask Randy something. I'll go talk to her. If Taft wants to see me he'll come out to the lab."

"Suit yourself," said Talbot.

Frescura left. He could hear him conversing briefly with Taft in Randy's office before Taft came in.

Andrew Taft was not the lean graying figure so familiar to the newscast public. He was tall, but he was also considerably heavier than he appeared to be on the screen. Distinguished citizens had certain prerogatives, and the networks saw to it that the lighting dealt kindly with them.

"Sorry about the party," Taft said on entering. "I flew up to try to persuade you to change your mind."

Talbot shook hands, using his most cautious Soleri approach. "You know how it is," he said in half-apology. "I've fallen behind since the tragedy. I've got to dig my way out."

"I've worried about you," said Taft. "So has Eleanor." He glanced up quickly. "Your insistence on shunning social engagements doesn't have anything to do with her, does it?"

"It doesn't," Talbot assured him.

"South Africa may be a nice place to live. But it's quite a distance. And I really am in a mess here."

"Nonsense. You can fly there in a few hours," said Taft.

"Eight," Talbot reminded him. "Service isn't good to that part of the globe."

"You can cut the time in half if you charter a direct flight," said Taft. "I suppose it would tire you out. But over-work can kill. You ought to call Eleanor. You know she won't take the initiative."

Talbot decided to risk a decisive move. "I'll call her now," he said.

"No, wait until I leave," said Taft hastily. "I don't want her to know I came to see you."

"Tonight then," suggested Talbot.

"Tonight's fine," said Taft. He chatted on inconsequentially for a time. Talbot could see that Soleri's relationship with Eleanor's family —though nominally cordial—was actually quite superficial, except possibly with Eleanor herself. He would have to be careful not to trip there.

"What's behind all this?" said Taft finally. "I know you. You work hard, but you can also relax. You're not the kind to turn down an invitation just because you're busy."

He'd judged the man correctly. Taft was shrewd, and quick to protect his own interests, daughter or company. "I may as well be frank," said Talbot heavily. "I'm afraid we're not going to develop the perfect rocket motor—or anything close to it."

"That's not what you said in your last report.

"Official optimism."

"It's not Frescura's attitude. I talked to him in Randy's office and he's brimming over with enthusiasm."

"Frescura will back his own work if it takes the last cent of the stockholders' money."

"Don't forget that some of that money belongs to him. He has stock in the company too. In fact, his holdings exceed yours."

"I know. But we've spent six times the amount we originally estimated. And the end's not even in sight. I haven't made up my mind, but I've been wondering lately. Perhaps we should abandon this line of research entirely. It may be the wisest course."

Taft stared at him, aghast. "You must be out of your mind. What would we do with this plant? Close it down?"

"We don't have to. We can lease research facilities to other companies. We can tackle short-range projects that *will* pay off."

Taft got up and paced the floor. "You're in favor of abandoning the perfect rocket motor?"

"I didn't say that. I merely said that I was thinking about it. Of course an alternative would be to reduce the scale of our efforts. Cut it back to a few men—something that we can afford."

"I don't know," said Taft in

agitation. "Frescura isn't going to like this."

"That's another matter I wanted to discuss with you," said Talbot. "Frescura is a valuable man—too brilliant to be wasted on a project that has no chance of success. We should assign him to something more worthy of his talent."

Taft sat down. "You are actually saying that we should forget about going to the stars."

"Not exactly. I think the idea should be placed in the proper perspective. Later developments may enable us to resurrect it." Talbot was somewhat bewildered. Taft's reaction had surprised him—although he couldn't have said quite what it was that he had expected.

"Don't you see what it means?" said Taft, his face lighting up. "If we develop the motor in our own shops it will be *ours*. We won't have to license it to others. Every bit of interstellar trade will be carried in our ships. Ours alone. *Monopoly.*"

"Monopoly is nice," said Talbot. "Bankruptcy isn't. That's what we face unless we cut down."

"TRANSPORTATION is years away from bankruptcy," said Taft sharply.

It was a shock to hear even that admission. Talbot's own knowledge of the company's financial position was fair. But Taft was in a better position to know the facts and if he said, even privately, that ruin was years away it could be assumed that he had grave doubts about the stability of the corporation.

The startling fact stood revealed in all its naked ugliness. The largest company in the solar system was none too secure. And it was the reckless expenditures that Soleri was directing that had led them to the brink of disaster. At least he had uncovered one motive. Someone with a knowledge of the truth was out to wreck TRANSPORTATION.

Before he could collect his thoughts there was an unexpected interruption. The door opened and Frescura came in, his face dark with anger. "As long as this is a stockholders' meeting I thought I'd make it a quorum," he said.

This much Talbot knew. Taft was the largest individual holder, owning something less than fifty percent of the total corporate shares. Frescura held a lesser percentage, though fractionally more than Soleri did. Together the three of them constituted an actual working majority. It had been their combined votes which had backed the project from the beginning.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," said Frescura. "Randy touched the wrong button while we were talking and I overheard part of the conversation. It concerned me—so I came in."

"We were discussing policy," said Taft soothingly. "Nothing was decided. You understand that."

"I understand," said Frescura in a hard set tone. "I also understand

that this man is dangerous. He is *not* Soleri."

The assurance that Talbot had gradually been acquiring suddenly collapsed. He sat motionless, while a cold constriction tightened about his heart.

Taft looked from Talbot to Frescura. "You can't be serious? I ought to be able to recognize my chief executive and my own daughter's fiance."

"Ordinally you would. But this man is a clever impostor," said Frescura. "He wants to abandon the project. Soleri would have recoiled from the thought."

"I see no significance in that. Anyone can change his mind."

"Proof is on the way," said Frescura. He seemed very sure of himself. "I began to suspect him when he put questions to me Soleri would not have needed to ask."

"It still isn't proof." But Taft was wavering. He turned and stared uncertainly at Talbot.

"You can't expect me to defend myself from a charge like this," said Talbot. He realized at once that it was a weak answer, and tried to strengthen it. "The fire in my office wasn't trivial. It's true, I may have suffered a slight memory loss. The bursting of a few tiny blood vessels in my brain would account for it. But that doesn't mean I'm less capable than before."

There was no possibility of escape. At Frescura's command plant protection would close every exit in the building. And then he'd be charged with sabotage and murder.

He had to sit it out. If he was exposed his only chance would be to claim that for a time he had actually thought himself to be Soleri. They'd investigate him psychologically, but mind tests weren't exact and he had a good chance of making them believe he was telling the truth.

"Nobody's doubting your mental competence," said Taft. "But there is some question as to who you are. Are you Evan Soleri?"

"What can I say to that?" said Talbot. "Are you Andrew Taft?"

"That's not a defense," said Frescura with smooth confidence. "It won't be difficult to establish your identity." He turned abruptly. "Come in Randy."

The door opened and Randy entered the room. Talbot was sure she had been listening to the entire conversation. He had never doubted her loyalty, but if Frescura had convinced her that he was not worthy of loyalty—

Frescura took the folder from her. Talbot knew what was coming but curiously it relieved him. At least Randy wasn't responsible.

"You can leave now," Frescura said sharply to her. Talbot knew she would continue to listen outside the door, and was glad he would not have to see her face.

"His right hand was badly burned," Frescura was saying. "New skin was grafted on. We can't prove anything from that."

"Fingerprints?" said Taft. "It's

an old method of identification, but I've often wondered why it has fallen into disrepute."

"Because of the prevalence of skin grafts," said Frescura. "But for certain purposes it's still the most accurate method." He smiled. "It's in the hospital record that his left hand wasn't burned. No skin was grafted on. The prints on that hand will show us who he really is."

He shook the folder at Talbot. "This man signed an authorization shortly before you came. When I heard what he said to you my suspicions were confirmed. I sent Randy down to plant protection for a comparison of prints. Here are the results."

He opened the folder, and looked at the three typed pages within. He stood there motionless, staring in consternation until the papers slid out and fluttered to the floor. His face was ashen. He reached out for support and lowered himself into a chair.

"What does it say?" said Taft impatiently. "My God, what's happening around this place anyway?" He scooped up the papers and read them silently. He passed them over to Talbot. "I'm sorry," he said. "Truly sorry. I should never have had even the slightest doubt about you."

Talbot's sight blurred as he read the comment from plant protection: "Comparison of prints with those in our file reveals that Evan Soleri signed this authorization. The left hand prints match perfectly. The right hand indicates a skin graft from which no identification can be made."

Empathy had saved him. It had collapsed the difference between one person and another to nothing —zero. It had changed more than his face to match the subject identity. To the tips of his fingers he was now Soleri. The change hadn't been made all at once; perhaps it had taken a week to reach completion. But here he was, safely Soleri —or trapped in the other identity. For the moment he preferred to think of it as safety.

"There are other tests," he said to Frescura. "I'll take them all, including the empathy index."

Frescura stirred dully. "It will be zero point ninety-five," he said.

"Don't bait him," said Taft sharply. "He made a mistake, granted. He accused you unjustly. But you must remember that you attacked a project he has devoted his life to. He's emotionally upset. What he did was understandable."

Frescura's eyes roamed across the ceiling. "I couldn't let you stop me," he whispered.

Taft grasped his shoulder encouragingly. "Nothing will stop us. We're going to the stars—no matter what it costs. However, you've been working too hard. I'll send my doctor to you. He's strict about some things but he's the best. He'll get you back in shape."

Taft turned to Talbot. "As for you, I don't like memory lapses,

even in minor matters. I want you to promise me you'll see my doctor after he gets through with Frescura."

"I'll be glad to," Talbot said, without animosity. "I've been wondering what to do."

Taft swung back to Frescura. By some personal miracle the man had pulled himself together again. He was alert and forceful. Taft regarded him with approval.

"That's better. Go home and rest. Don't work today."

"You're right," Frescura said. "I should do that. I'll have to drop by the lab and tell the boys I won't be in for a few days."

"Evan will tell them. We'll call a cab and get you on your way. Don't worry about anything. The project will be continued."

They waited until Frescura left in an aircab. Taft got up, shaking his head bewilderedly. "Well, I'll go too. Don't forget that call tonight."

"I won't. I'll be sure and call her."

"Good." Taft wiped his forehead. "This has been a hassle. We have them occasionally but I've never seen one to equal this." Still shaking his head he went away.

Talbot leaned back and closed his eyes. He had achieved a victory that was far from superficial and it gave him a feeling of personal solidity. He was Soleri and he was going to be Soleri and nobody would ever know the difference.

But the rest didn't make sense. Both Taft and Frescura were now beyond suspicion. He had nothing to go on—nothing at all. He'd have to re-examine the whole problem from the beginning. Somewhere within the plant was a criminal conspirator who didn't want TRANSPORTATION to develop the perfect rocket motor. He was still there. He had killed once, and he wouldn't hesitate to kill again.

Why? If he could put his finger on the man's motivating impulse he could track him down with little trouble. Somehow it seemed to go far beyond ordinary commercial rivalry.

Talbot heard a sound at his elbow and opened his eyes. Randy was standing beside the desk.

"Sleeping?" she asked, smiling at him.

"No, just thinking," he said.

She leaned toward him. "Think about this then. I want to leave early."

He stared at her, puzzled. "No. There's work to do."

"But there isn't," she assured him. "I ought to know."

He realized then that she wanted him to know that she had listened to most of the conversation. Probably she'd read the note from plant protection. Talbot thought of the call he'd have to make later. He had no desire to make her listen to that too.

"All right," he said. "I guess you know by now that I can't play the stern employer when you look at me like that."

She smiled at him, turned and went out.

He remained in his office thinking throughout the afternoon. He went home late—and alone.

VII

IN A DIM corner of the apartment Talbot fingered a picture of Eleanor. Soleri's taste in women closely paralleled his own. From a distance Eleanor could be mistaken for Laura. She was a trifle prettier perhaps, more lighthearted and whimsical, and more used to having her own way.

He didn't want to put through a long-distance call to her. He was entangled enough as it was with Randy, the three-cornered struggle between himself, Taft and Frescura and the unknown obstructionist in the plant, not to mention the perfectly efficient rocket motor that was never going to be built.

He laid the picture face downwards on his desk, and went to the screen. But he didn't call Eleanor Taft in her South African home. He called Randy.

She answered in a charming state of dishabille. "Is this the way you always come to the screen?" he asked.

"I knew it was you," she replied. "I'm only surprised that you didn't call sooner."

"Put some clothes on," he said.

"Don't you like it? Or are you asking me to come over?"

"I like it," he said. "But don't come over. Not yet. I want some information. Precisely what did you do this afternoon?"

She made a face. "It was awful. Candidly I thought I'd stumbled into an old fashioned mental institution. I never would have believed I was eavesdropping on a high-level conference between the three top minds in the biggest corporation in the system."

"We're human too," he said gloomily. "At least I think we are. What I meant was: What did you do when Frescura came out of my office and Taft went in?"

"Do you want a detailed report?"

"Yes—all of it. Exactly as it happened."

"Well, Frescura came out and talked to Taft for a moment. Taft went in to see you, and Frescura wanted some information from another office. He sent me to get it. When I came back he handed me the folder and told me to take it to plant protection. He said to wait there for results and bring it back as soon as I could."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Good," Talbot said. "Put on your clothes and come over."

"I'm glad you changed your mind."

"So am I. But I won't be home when you get here. I may not be back until quite late. Whatever you do, don't leave the apartment until I return. Promise?"

"What choice do you give me? I'll wait."

He cut off the screen and reached for a jacket. With methodical persistence he went through Soleri's possessions until he found a gun. He had expected to find one. He checked it swiftly to make sure that it was loaded and in working condition. It was. He pocketed it with satisfaction and called a cab. He had to hurry.

He saw from the air that the entire plant was dark except for a light in one of the offices. Even from a distance he thought he could tell which office it was. The cab landed, and he got out. There was a guard at the office entrance. He questioned the man quickly, and thoroughly.

The plant was closed down tight. All of the other gates were securely locked and would remain closed until morning. The guard hadn't seen anyone leave or enter the building. He didn't know whether or not the office was occupied but it was reasonable to suppose that someone might be working late. Talbot stood back and looked. The light wasn't visible from the corridor entrance.

Talbot told the guard to stop anyone who came out. He went in and made a tour of the offices. They were all dark. The man in the lighted office had apparently heard Talbot enter the building and had left ahead of him.

Talbot moved warily into the main shop. It was huge, cavernous and dim. He would not have been able to see at all except for the luminous strip which edged the aisles. Shadows loomed on the walls and ceiling and it would have been a simple matter for an intruder to conceal himself behind one of the machines.

He went on. None of the laboratories were lighted. Back and forth across the plant he went, always sure there was a man just ahead of him he could never quite overtake. He turned and had begun to retrace his route when a light snapped on in the middle section of the building. He felt the gun in his pocket and walked to the edge of the circle of light.

Frescura was standing completely motionless behind a machine, his head inclined. He looked up abruptly as Talbot approached. "I knew you would come back," said Talbot.

"I did," acknowledged Frescura.

"You lied this afternoon," Talbot said. "Randy didn't 'accidentally' touch the button which enabled you to hear what I was saying. She wasn't there. You sent her away so that you could listen."

Frescura smiled and said nothing.

"You figured out what I was going to recommend to Taft. But you wanted to be sure. Another thing, I didn't slip. You knew from the beginning or you would never have thought of the fingerprint subterfuge. You had to be the one who rolled in the bomb."

"Of course," said Frescura. "Soleri confided to only two people that he was going to bring you in

—myself and Randy. If Soleri had survived he would have remembered that. Therefore I guessed the truth instantly. I knew what you were capable of. That's why I tried to get rid of both you, and Soleri."

"You must have sweated while I was in the hospital," said Talbot. "It's a good thing Randy was watching over me."

"It was a good thing for you that I was nervous," said Frescura. "Later, when you got well and didn't say anything I knew exactly what had happened. I thought I could handle you."

"That was your biggest mistake. I caused all sorts of trouble. But why did you have to get rid of anyone? Was it because you were close to success? Or because you wanted the discovery for yourself when the company failed?"

"You're still thinking in terms of money," said Frescura. "There are things of far greater importance. The discovery was mine. It was mine from the very beginning. I did all the fundamental work. After the first year I could have built a motor that would drive a ship near the speed of light."

Talbot leaned back. "And you still asked for more money, pouring it endlessly into non-existent research? I'll admit that you could have led us astray—if anybody could. But why?"

"I wanted to be absolutely successful in establishing a conviction that the motor could never be built," said Frescura. "It was a problem in business psychology. I bought shares in the largest company in existence. I had influence, and I persuaded them to spend impossible sums under the direction of the foremost scientist in the field—myself. If that combination couldn't build the motor no one else would ever try."

"What did you have to gain?" said Talbot.

"Why don't you ask me what I had to lose," countered Frescura. "That engine would take us to the stars. Mankind isn't ready for it."

"There's something to what you say," conceded Talbot. "Maybe we're not ready. I'm not a judge. But you're a scientist. Nearly everyone in your family has been a distinguished scientist for generations. Surely *you* should know that man is never fully ready for any new discovery."

"I am aware of my family's collective guilt," said Frescura. "But no Frescura will ever again be instrumental in leading mankind to the verge of destruction."

"That's not an enlightening or entirely sane explanation," said Talbot.

"To you, perhaps not," said Frescura. "To me it is. Both of my grandfathers worked on the atom bomb. It has haunted us—"

Talbot's hand moved toward the gun in his pocket. "I see," he said. "It might haunt some people. However that disaster was prevented, just as your insane little scheme will be. You've failed."

"You're mistaken," said Frescura. "This afternoon I knew you'd begin to suspect me. I left deliberately, making sure you would see me go. But I came back."

"So did I," said Talbot. "You failed."

"I hardly think you'll shoot me," said Frescura.

"I will if I have to. You left notes. Other men will make good use of them now that they know you've been guilty of sabotage and murder."

"My notes will be quite useless to them," said Frescura with a melancholy smile. "I told you I was far ahead of everyone else in the field."

The gun came out of Talbot's pocket. He was sweating. "There are times when everyone feels that the human race isn't worth blowing to hell," he said. "You'll feel differently after psychology. Let's go."

"I can't. My foot's caught, and I'm in great pain. I turned on the light to prevent you from plugging away at me in the darkness." He was staring intently at Talbot's weapon. "I don't have a gun. You will have to help me."

Talbot had no intention of moving any closer to Frescura's powerful arms. "You'll have to free yourself," he said. "Your foot will slip out of the shoe."

"I'll try." Frescura leaned on the machine and strained. His leg swung free. There was an odd rattling sound. Talbot glanced down —and froze. Scores of black spheres were rolling across the floor in all directions. Thermal capsules! Frescura had quite obviously been lying about the injury to his leg. He had resorted to the subterfuge to distract Talbot's attention while he overturned a small box at the base of the machine with a swift carefully timed kick,

Talbot glanced up. Frescura had leapt back into the shadows, and was crouching behind the machines, his bulk only faintly visible in the dim light.

"Can you find all of them in this light—in the time you have left?" he taunted. "What would you do with them if you succeeded?"

Talbot raised his gun and sent a shot crashing into the shadows in the general direction of the voice. As the dim subsided he called out, "The next one will be you! Start toward the front."

There was a mocking laugh from another direction. "I don't think I will. But you'd better hurry, Talbot."

He didn't stop to argue. The shop would be an inferno when the covering of the capsules disintegrated.

The shop was long, but it took him scarcely an instant to reach the office building. The two structures were connected, but there was a massive firewall between them. Talbot was thankful for the wall's protection.

At the corridor near the outside entrance he tried to turn too quickly and went sprawling into a side

passageway. He cursed the panic which had caused him to stumble. It wasn't entirely physical. His knees had simply buckled and he couldn't control his actions as he slammed into the wall and fell. He was trying to get up when the thermal concussion hit him.

The superheated air expanded violently and hurled him flat again. In the shop steel and concrete had been instantly vaporized near each sphere. But the firewall at the office held. It took up most of the shock before it crumbled, and the sprinklers switched on.

Talbot became suddenly and violently ill. It was partly a nervous reaction, partly a physical one. The guard from the outside came by, running toward the explosion. He didn't see Talbot lying stretched out on the floor in the side corridor.

Talbot staggered to his feet and went outside. He was still panic stricken; he ran.

When finally he was out of breath and the fear and nausea had diminished, he slowed down. He came to a rise in the street and looked back. The shop was a glowing mass of white hot steel and concrete. Now and then a capsule which had been timed for a different interval belatedly let loose, sending up a shower of sparks. Frescura was dead.

Attracted by the fire and explosion people were coming out on the street. It was dark and he was glad he couldn't see their faces. He tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He went by a group under a street light. A little boy stopped in front of him, gazing up.

"Mommy, what's the matter with him?" shrieked the child, pointing to Talbot's face.

The woman looked too. "Hush," she said, jerking her son back. "You know it's bad manners to point."

"But what's the *matter* with him?" persisted the child.

Talbot walked on. His clothing was disheveled, but not burned. He felt light-headed, unsteady on his feet. He was not surprised that the woman had pulled the child away.

He had done his best. He had tried desperately to save Frescura from his misplaced guilt feelings. Now he was going home to Randy. He had thought his return would be more triumphant than this.

He was nearing the apartment when he caught sight of himself in a shop mirror. He went past, then came back, and looked again. Finally he looked away. Into his mind had washed a torrent of terror. His eyes seemed empty and hueless.

His cheeks sagged. His face was *Between.*

His empathy had been shattered by shock and fear. He could close the gulf between Soleri and himself because they had been very much alike to begin with. But Frescura was different, incomprehensible. He could never have succeeded in understanding Frescura.

He had caught the last shreds of

Frescura's consciousness, and it was that terrifying awareness which had sent him sprawling just before the concussion. The obscure forces of his mind tried always to put him in another's place. In times of extreme mental reaction the force became much stronger. But it couldn't span the emotional gulf between himself and the scientist.

What it had done was to force out the lingering hold Soleri's personality still had on him. He was no longer Soleri. But by the same token he was not yet himself.

He was reverting.

And his face was Between. It was a visible indication of what he was becoming. He couldn't ever hope to pass as Soleri again. And that meant that Randy would be lost to him forever.

He turned and walked away from the apartment. His thoughts were dull and blank. He walked on until his body rebelled.

He stared about him. His wandering hadn't been haphazard. Subconsciously his steps had taken him to his old apartment. He was standing in front of the building where he had lived as Hal Talbot. Wearily he climbed two flights of stairs and let himself in with a key which he had never discarded.

He fell on the bed. It was Talbot who went to sleep.

VIII

In the morning he avoided shaving. He didn't want to look in the mirror. He ate, slept again, and listened to newscasts.

The newscaster announced that both Soleri and Frescura were dead. Soleri had been seen entering the plant but he hadn't come out. Frescura's death was harder to determine. He had left in the afternoon but there were definite indications that he had returned to the main workshop. The office building hadn't been destroyed but the intense heat from the adjacent shop had caused considerable damage. A report had been found indicating that Frescura had planned a final experiment. He had been aware of the danger, and had planned to perform it at night in the workshop. An unexpected accident had apparently led to the tragedy.

The loss of building and equipment was partly covered by insurance. The company hastened to assure the public that there was sufficient capital in reserve to enable it to survive the blow to its financial stability.

Talbot shut off the newscast. He might have liked Frescura. Except for his excessive guilt complex the man had been heroic. And Talbot had to admit that Frescura had been right in one detail. He hadn't failed. The perfect rocket motor would never be fully constructed in this century.

Meanwhile, he had a problem. What did the future hold for him? He lunched frugally, and tried to control his agitation. In the middle

of the afternoon there was a knock on the door.

Randy had found him. She came in quietly and looked around at the shabby little apartment.

"I didn't come to ask questions, although I have a right to," she said. "But you made a mistake. Your salary allotment is on the executive payroll. It came to me for verification."

"You can't prove anything," he said. "And if you could—would it matter?"

"I can prove all I want to prove," she said.

"Soleri's dead."

"I know," she said. "I've known for a long time. That wasn't the only mistake you made."

"You've known for a long time?" He sat down.

"Since the night I took you home from the hospital—and stayed. You said the wrong things. You kept giving yourself away. Don't forget I was hired because I'm a psychologist."

She stared at him steadily. "You told me that nothing had changed between us. But you were mistaken. I'm not in the habit of throwing myself at men. I admit I did at Soleri, just a little. But he was not in love with me. He might have been—except that he was in love with Eleanor."

"Why didn't you tell someone?" Talbot said. "Take it to plant protection?"

"I couldn't," she said. "I was upset, but I had trapped myself. I couldn't—not until I figured things out. A few days later I decided not to interfere. You told me that a man had been killed and that you intended to find out why. I knew that you were not responsible for what had happened, that you were not just a self-seeking opportunist."

So his masquerade hadn't been nearly as good as he had thought! At least two people had seen through it. "That arrangement you mentioned—your statement that you were going home early. Was that deliberate too?"

"I wanted more proof that you weren't Soleri," said Randy. "And —well, I wanted to see if you minded. I'm glad you did."

His thoughts were whirling and he couldn't look at her. Mechanically Talbot opened the envelope. There was more money in it for his three weeks of employment than he had earned in any previous three months.

"When I put Talbot on the payroll I thought you were dead," said Randy. "It was going to be your last job—so I made it a good one. I signed you on as assistant to Soleri."

He could do without that. He didn't need any industrial "assists" apart from himself, and his training in transportation and electronics.

"Taft is hoping you'll show up," said Randy. "His two top men are gone. He needs a new executive familiar with the organization. The company will still do research, on a dozen new projects. It has to

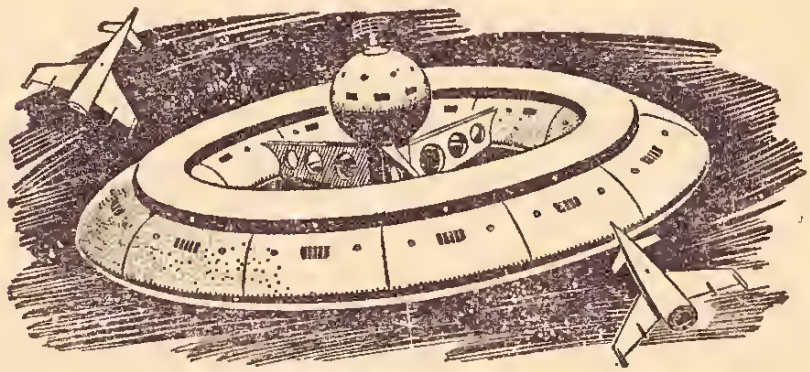
keep on with experimental work if it's going to survive."

"Thanks for the tip!" He grinned at her. "I might go down and see what position they have for a man of my ability. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

He crossed the room and looked down at her. "But you've got to understand this—there are some things for which I can't be any man's assistant."

"You won't be," said Randy. "Don't you know you never were?"

He knew it now. It was good to be himself again.



Among the Contributors to Next Month's Amazing Issue will be

STANLEY MULLEN, *with* "The Lair of the Phoenix"
ALAN E. NOURSE, *with* "Second Sight"
H. NEARING, JR., *with* "The Neurotic Rose"
FRANK B. BRYNING, *with* "On the Average'
MILTON LESSER, *with* "Meet Miss Solar System"

and many others

the other kids

by . . . Robert F. Young

It was such a pitifully tiny flying saucer. How could the lonely, small voyager within be hateful—and an enemy to man?

BY THE time the two army officers came up in the jeep half the population of the little town was standing along the edge of the meadow. It wasn't a particularly large crowd, but it was a nasty one. There were shotguns in it, and rifles and knives and lead pipes and baseball bats.

Captain Blair waited till the two truckloads of soldiers arrived, then he pushed his way through the crowd to the meadow. Lieutenant Simms followed.

The sheriff was standing in front of the crowd, a brand new .270 balanced in the crook of his arm. He nodded to the captain. "Thought I'd better let the army in on this," he said in a thin rasping voice. "It's a little out of my line."

The captain squinted at the saucer. It sat in the middle of the meadow, gleaming in the October sunlight. It looked like a King-size Aladdin's lamp; an Aladdin's lamp without chimney or base, and totally lacking in ornamentation. The captain had read most of the

Robert F Young seems determined to surprise us. In his previous stories he has traveled to the farthest planet of the farthest star, evoking desert splendors and the mysterious interplay of light and shadow on monuments lost to Time's recall. Here he brings us a very human, realistic little story of memory recall on Earth. But the vistas that stretch beyond it are as strange, as heartbreakingly moving, as Lieutenant Simms' struggle to break the mold of humanity's cruel intolerance and achieve brotherhood on a cosmic scale.

accounts about saucers and he had always been impressed by their dimensions, though he had never admitted it to anyone.

This one was disappointing. It was a distinct letdown. It was so small it couldn't possibly contain more than a crew of one, unless you postulated pint-size Martians. The captain was disgusted. He was sacrificing his Sunday morning sack time for nothing.

Still, he reconsidered, it *was* the first authentic saucer, and if it contained any kind of life at all, pint-size or otherwise, he would be the first human to contact it. There would be generals on the scene before long of course, and probably even chiefs of staff. But until they got there the responsibility was his. A tiny gold leaf fluttered before his eyes.

He turned to the lieutenant who was quite young and who, in the captain's private opinion, had no business in this man's army. "Deploy the men," the captain said. Then he turned to the sheriff. "Get those people the hell out of here where they won't get hurt!"

The meadow came to life. The crowd shuffled back just far enough to give the impression of compliance, muttered just loud enough to imply resentment, and parted just wide enough to let the soldiers through. The soldiers came running, rifles at port, and deployed around the saucer at the lieutenant's direction, each man dropping to prone position.

The lieutenant rejoined the captain and the two officers stood looking at the little saucer. The lieutenant was having trouble with a memory. It concerned something that had happened to him when he was a small boy, but the trouble was he couldn't recall exactly what it was that had happened. All he could remember was the part that led up to the part he *wanted* to remember.

He could recall the circumstances clearly enough: the house in the new neighborhood, the morning after the first snow— The snow had been white and wonderful when he had looked at it from his strange bedroom window, and all he could think of while he was getting dressed was running outside and finding out was it good packing and building a snowman and maybe a fort, and playing games . . .

He heard the shouts and laughter of the other neighborhood kids while he was eating breakfast and he was so excited he couldn't finish his cereal. He gulped down his milk, choking a little, and ran into the hall for his coat and leggings. His mother made him wear the wool scarf that always prickled his neck, and she buttoned the flaps of his toboggan hat in under his chin.

He ran out into the bright morning—

And there the memory stopped. Try as he would, the lieutenant couldn't recall the rest of it.

Finally he gave up and devoted his attention to the saucer. The memory had no business in his mind at such a time anyway, and he couldn't understand what had evoked it.

"Do you think we'll have trouble, sir?" he asked the captain.

"We didn't come out here on a picnic, Lieutenant. Of course there'll be trouble. This may even be an act of war."

"Or of peace."

The captain's seamed face grew red. "Do you consider sneaking down during the night, eluding our radar, and landing way out here in the sticks an act of peace, Lieutenant?"

"But it's such an insignificant little ship—if it is a ship. It's almost like a toy. Why, I'll bet if you rubbed it a genie would appear."

"Lieutenant, I consider your attitude unmilitary. You're talking like a child."

"Sorry, sir."

The morning had grown quiet. The sound of the crowd had diminished to an occasional shuffling of restless feet and an occasional mutter of voices. The soldiers lay silently in the dun meadow grass. High in the cloudless sky a V of geese soared sedately south.

Suddenly the village church bell began to peal. The sound washed over the fields in sonorous, shocking waves. Even the captain jumped a little. But he recovered himself so quickly that no one noticed. He lit a cigarette slowly and deliberately.

"I hope all you men remembered to bring your hymn books," he said in a loud voice.

Nervous laughter rippled round the circle of waiting soldiers. "Hallelujah!" someone shouted. The old man was a good Joe after all.

The last peal of the bell lingered for a long time, then gradually trailed away. The crowd whispered to itself, but remained intact. The sheriff pulled out a red bandanna handkerchief and began polishing the barrel of his .270. He stood just behind the two officers.

The saucer gleamed enigmatically in the sunlight. The captain's eyes were starting to ache and he looked away for a moment to rest them. When he looked back the top half of the saucer was rising like the top section of a clam shell.

It rose slowly, up and back, flashing in the sunlight. Presently it stopped and something climbed out of its interior and slipped to the ground. Something with big bright eyes and too many limbs.

The captain drew his .45. Rifle bolts snickered around the circle of soldiers.

"It looks like it's been injured," the lieutenant said. "See, one of its arms—"

"Draw your weapon, Lieutenant!"

The lieutenant drew his .45.

The genie stood in the shadow

of the ship, its luminous eyes glowing palely. A morning wind crept down from the hills and riffled the meadow grass. The sun shone brightly.

Presently the genie moved out of the shadow. It started forward, in the direction of the two officers. It was a livid green in color and it definitely had too many limbs, most of them legs. It was impossible to tell whether the creature was running or walking.

The captain's voice was tight. "Give the order to fire, Lieutenant!"

"But sir, I'm sure it's harmless."

"You blind? It's attacking us!"

The sheriff's rasping voice had thickened. "Sure it's attacking us," he said, his breath hot on the lieutenant's neck.

The lieutenant said nothing. The rest of the memory was emerging from his subconscious where it had been hiding for fifteen years.

He was running out of the house again, and into the bright morning. He started across the street to where the other kids were playing in the snow. He didn't see the snowball. It had been packed tight and it had been thrown hard. It struck him squarely in the face, exploding in blind numbing pain.

He stopped in the middle of the street. At first he couldn't see, but after a while his eyes cleared. But only for a moment. Then they were blind again, blind with tears, and he was running back to the house, back to the warm comfort of his mother's arms—

The captain's voice was taut. "I'll give you one more chance, Lieutenant. Give the order to fire!"

The lieutenant stood silently, his face contorted with the remembered pain.

"Fire!" the captain screamed.

The morning detonated.

The captain and the soldiers and the sheriff shot the genie. The genie's eyes went out like shattered electric light bulbs and it collapsed into a tangle of arms and legs.

The lieutenant shot the captain. The captain's face looked silly as he slipped slowly to the ground. His officer's cap had come off and so had the top of his head.

After that the lieutenant was running. He looked wildly around for the house but it wasn't there any longer. And that was odd, he thought. It had been there a moment ago.

One of the other kids was shouting something in a thin rasping voice but he did not stop. He kept on running. He had to find the house, the security of the house, the warmth of his mother's arms—

The second snowball struck him squarely in the back of the head. It wasn't half as bad as the first one had been. The first one had hurt all the way through him. The first one had never stopped hurting. This one didn't hurt at all. There was just a sudden flash of brightness, and then nothing—

Nothing at all.

justice

by . . . J. F. Hutton

Urs' sword was not designed for a Briton's pleasure. But to a kingly man Time has no boundary

As Urs stood facing the System Policy Board, his young face mirrored an incredible confidence which gave no hint of the tormenting uncertainty within him. Few of the billions watching on life-view screens suspected the effort it cost him to remain outwardly poised and self-reliant.

For this was no departmental board, judging small matters of discipline. This was the big one. Much more than the welfare of one individual was involved in any matter that came before it. It was the ultimate court. And it was motivated by one principle—absolute justice.

Before he had been summoned, Urs had spent a half hour with the director of the Time Traveler's Bureau. They hadn't talked much, after the director's opening words of reassurance.

"Urs, all of us know we're doing the best we can under difficult conditions. We've managed to keep our problems to ourselves, so far. Now that's over. We re not blaming you. It could have happened to any of us. We'll just have to consider it a bad break, and hope for the best."

There are historical figures so resplendent in their legendary permanence that no one age can truly claim them Their deeds ring out across history, for youth must eternally respond to a clarion call which Time's tyranny will never silence. Give ear, then, as J. F. Hutton evokes from the past a marvel as mysterious as the time travel paradox at the core of this amazing story.

Now the director and dozens of Urs' colleagues were watching, in silent anxiety. They were sweating it out with him, reminding themselves that any one of them could just as well be on trial instead.

The white-haired chairman of the Policy Board stirred in his recliner. "Third Level Time Explorer Urs, you are charged with breaking System Policy Rule number 86, Subhead C, of the General Code of Time Travel: 'No visitor to a previous time shall in any way allow the knowledge or techniques of the future to become a part of that preceding culture.'

"You learned this rule in the first week of your preliminary training. It has been periodically reviewed in your refresher courses since. And you received special indoctrination before each of your trips."

Standing tall and straight in his sky-blue uniform, Urs could only nod.

The five other members of the Board steadily regarded the young man before them. Their gazes held neither censure nor sympathy. They were of the same stamp as the chairman—pale, professional weighers of evidence.

The chairman continued, "Specifically, you entered a primitive society on the planet Earth in a region known as Great Britain. Your project was to gather data for a culture-graph, in conformity with the continuing study of a pattern which originated in that area and subsequently profoundly affected Earth and her satellites.

"An experienced Time Traveler, you had the customary indoctrination—costume, mores, language, comprehension levels, and so on. Your equipment was made in accordance with careful specifications in the duplicating shops."

Urs spoke for the first time. To his surprise, his voice came out strong and clear. "May I request, sir, that the record show that one item of equipment was wrongly made? The wand. Instead of the crude metal of the time I visited, it was made of our alloy, impregnium."

"That fact has been noted," the chairman said gravely. He glanced around at his colleagues. "There was an acknowledged error in the shops. The situation has been corrected."

"Thank you."

You never argued with the System Policy Board. You thought very carefully before you even asked a question. Mostly, you just listened respectfully, even when they were methodically destroying you. For the Board was incorruptible. It was as nearly infallible as a human institution could be. It represented something man had sought for ages—completely impartial justice.

There was a kind of inevitability in such trials which—tedious though some of them were—never failed to attract enthralled watchers all over the galaxy. And none had

ever watched more tensely than the silent men in blue uniforms before the big life screen at the Time Traveler's Bureau.

The chairman's old eyes lingered on Urs. "You are held responsible here only for your actions in the region called Great Britain. The error you mentioned, however, is pertinent to this inquiry. We have carefully examined your personal experience tapes. They reveal you were aware of the mistake in the metal in time to take corrective action before the rule was broken. This you failed to do."

In spite of his effort at self-control, Urs trembled. He suddenly wanted to drown out those slow, logical phrases, to shout, "When did any of you ever travel in time? You sit here in the splendor of your logic—mental and physical light-years away from the event. You can't conceive how crude and disorganized those days were. Do you think it's easy to enter a world like that? It takes all the skill and care and self-discipline you can command. And no man who ever lived could exercise the control the manuals call for.

"If you only knew what really goes on in time exploration! You *think* you do. You read the manuals, you examine the rules of policy, you see the personal experience tapes we turn in. But did you know that most of the time we manage to doctor those tapes, to protect ourselves?

"Ah, if you only knew . . ."

WEARING light armor, Urs had been riding on a lonely trail. In that time, in that place, it was a risky business—even for an Explorer. And his luck ran out. Brigands caught up with him, charging on their wiry, tangle-haired horses.

Urs whacked his own mount and tried to outrun them. Screeching, they chased him over gullies and ravines, through dense scrub and under oaks that threatened to sweep him out of the saddle. But gradually, they gained on him.

For you can study the riding of horses. You can practice faithfully on the test models. But you'll never learn how difficult it really is till you have a living, snorting beast lunging unpredictably between your legs.

Inevitably, Urs fell off his horse. With the shouts of the brigands loud in his ears, with arrows plunking into the sod around him, he dived down a steep, grassy slope. Then he jumped up and ran, twisting and dodging among trees and rocks. In one hand he carried the shining wand that in England in those days was called a "sword."

Three of the robbers had left their horses to chase him on foot. The other three circled around to head him off. Halfway down the hill, Urs lost his footing and slid again. Flailing his arms, he fell against a great boulder. His wand, carried forward by his weight, plunged into the rock.

At the moment, Urs was too

busy dodging the arrows and regaining his balance to realize what that meant. The men pounced on him. One held his arms, while another caught him around the neck from behind.

The third man gave a great startled cry. Eyes wide, bristly face twitching, he pointed one skinny arm at the rock. His companions looked, gasped, and let go of Urs. They stood transfixed, showing all the signs of men half-scared to death.

The other three, hearing the first exultant shouts, had dismounted and were hurrying up. They saw the rock, with the sword buried in it nearly to the hilt. They stopped dead, turned pale, and began to tremble.

Urs was understandably mystified by this abrupt change of pace. Staring at the rock, he became aware of what had happened. Had it been made of the proper crude Earth metal, his wand could never have penetrated it. For the first time he realized that the shops had sent him off with an impregnium sword.

The only way out of the situation was to jerk the weapon loose, then press the time-stud embedded under the skin of his waist. But one of his attackers, half-hysterical, was drawing his bow. Those brawny arms looked strong enough to send an arrow to the moon. The wand dropped out of Urs' mind. His fingers flew to the stud that would snatch him out of this world and safely back to his own.

He vanished, leaving six badly frightened Englishmen blinking at the rock and the sword so impossibly fixed in it.

THE CHAIRMAN paused, looked courteously at Urs. The charge had been specified. Now was the time for Urs to speak, if he had anything to say.

Urs swallowed the dryness in his throat. "Sir, the facts you describe are correct."

There was a stir among the watching men at the Time Traveler's Bureau. At millions of other locations, people in front of life screens nodded to one another. What else could he have said?

Urs looked at the calm, intelligent faces before him. Now, if ever, was the time for his outburst. But he couldn't bring himself to speak. He moistened his lips and kept silent.

The chairman nodded. "The Board will call a witness."

A security man opened a side door of the chamber. A tall redheaded man in a sky-blue uniform stepped hesitantly forward. He walked slowly across the floor and stood beside Urs.

"This is Third Level Time Explorer Renar."

Urs nodded dumbly. He and Renar were fellow-workers. They had parted at the Time Traveler's Bureau not an hour before. And from the look on his face, Renar

was as surprised to be here as Urs was to see him.

"Timer Explorer Renar," the chairman said, "please tell us the kind of work you are doing now."

Nervously, but with more assurance as he warmed up, Renar explained that he had been working on the culture pattern of Great Britain. The studies that he, Urs and others were making would dove-tail into a master graph.

"And what time were you studying, with relation to Urs' last trip?"

Renar scratched his head. "Roughly twenty years later."

"Thank you. Now will you tell us exactly what happened on your last trip."

Renar hesitated, his homely face screwed up concernedly. "Well," he began—and stopped.

There was the faintest lessening of the sternness in the chairman's face. It could not have been called a smile, nor even the beginning of one. But it matched the shade of sympathetic understanding in his voice. "Renar, may I remind you I already know what happened. I want Urs and the others to hear it."

"Yes, sir." Renar still looked troubled. "You must understand that time travel does not always work out according to the rules. Things happen—"

"That," the chairman said, "is the reason for this trial. Now please describe your arrival in primitive Great Britain."

"Well, sir, when I made my last trip, there was some slight error in calculating the physical plane of my appearance. When I came out in that previous time I was not on dry land, but under water."

Not one of the Board members smiled. But there were chuckles in front of millions of life screens.

"I wasn't far under the surface. But you can understand I was startled and confused. I thrashed around, trying to get to air. One arm broke through the surface of the lake I was in. To my great surprise, something was immediately dropped into it. Instinctively, I grabbed hold and pulled. But the object wasn't attached to anything.

"On the contrary, its extra weight added to mine caused me to start sinking. I struggled a few seconds longer. Then I gave up, pressed my waist stud, and returned to the present."

"And the object?"

"I held on to it. It's in my room at the Time Traveler's Bureau. I—uh—"

"Yes," the chairman said calmly, "you were troubled about reporting it. Because it meant something had gone wrong. Somewhere along the line, the rules had been violated."

"Yes, sir," Renar said, a little despairingly.

Urs spoke. "Honorable Chairman, may I say that every man connected with Time Travel is loyal and conscientious. We all try to adhere strictly to the code. It

was not Renar's fault that this unforeseen emergency arose."

"Thank you, Urs." The chairman raised a hand. A Security man approached and held something out. "Renar, is this what you caught hold of in the water?"

Renar nodded. Urs gasped. It was the shining impregnium wand he had left in the rock!

Back in the Time Traveler's Bureau, the men looked at each other and started to talk excitedly.

The Board members leaned forward in their recliners for a closer inspection of the sword. Urs and Renar exchanged a quick, hopeful glance.

"You, Urs, allowed this wand to become a part of that ancient culture. It remained there for twenty years or so. The people of that time did not know how it was made, nor did they discover any of our techniques from it. It has now been removed from that time.

"We are now faced with a matter of interpretation of Policy Rule number 86, Subhead C, which does not consider the subsequent removal of a knowledge or technique inadvertently left in the past. I shall call another witness."

Urs and Renar turned. A short, precise man in a rust-colored uniform came out of the side door and marched up beside them.

"Morrey," the chairman said, "will you please describe your work?"

"Sir," Morrey said in a businesslike voice, "I am an historical synthesist. I take the reports of the Time Explorers and fit them together into culture graphs. I analyze and interpret the data that comes in, and I make recommendations for further time explorations, as needed."

"Thank you. Now will you please tell Explorers Urs and Renar about the dominant personality in Great Britain during the period between their respective visits?"

"Gladly, sir." Morrey turned slightly toward the two. "We are not entirely certain, yet, how much is fact and how much legend, for the story of this man reached far forward in history. But we do know that he became famous because he was the only man who could pull the wand—which they called a 'sword'—from the rock in which it was embedded. He kept it. Because of properties which we take for granted, the sword had a strange and wonderful appeal to the imaginations of his time. In their superstitious way, those people attributed magical qualities to it, and to the one who carried it.

"That man became a king. He was one of the strongest forces for good, for order, and for justice that civilization there had seen. The man was a giant, in mind and stature. He had a tremendous impact on his time. As I said before, he became a legendary figure. His story retained the power to thrill people for centuries afterward.

"We are not sure how much this man knew or suspected about

the wand. We are still studying that. But it is clear from the way he disposed of it when he lay dying, that he may have had some insight into its source. He sent one of his men, who bore the quaint name of 'Bedivere' to return it to a mythical 'Lady of the Lake.' Bedivere, of course, saw Renar's hand rising from the water at precisely the correct moment, and placed the sword in it."

The chairman was silent a few moments after Morrey finished. "And what did they call this man?"

"King Arthur."

The old man nodded. "Third Level Time Explorer Urs, have you anything further to say?"

Urs gulped. "No, sir."

"Then the Board finds that you have violated the letter of the General Code of Time Travel."

In the lounge of the Bureau, the waiting men blanched and looked at one another in shock.

"However," the chairman of the System Policy Board went on, "the Board also finds that you have not violated the spirit in which the Code was drafted. Neither, in spite of his irregular experience, did Explorer Renar.

"A just decision must take both of these factors into proper account. Thanks to the accident that befell Renar, and to the character of this ancient man, King Arthur, we pronounce you free to return to your work with your record unblemished."

In the Time Traveler's Bureau, men shouted and pounded one another on the back. People smiled, in front of their life screens all over the galaxy. "Justice," they said to one another.

Urs bowed respectfully to the Board, then turned and clasped Renar's hand.

They walked back to the Bureau together.

"I owe you a drink," Urs said.

"I'll take it gladly," Renar replied. "You knew you were going to appear before the Board. They called me without warning. And that, my friend, is a strain I hope you never go through."

"Well, the decision helps us all." Urs extended the impregnium wand. "We'll keep this in the hall, as a reminder. What was it Morrey said they called it?"

Renar scratched his red head. "It was a strange name. Oh, yes. Excalibur."

the vidiot

by . . . Ib Melchior

There are a good many startling surprises in TV camera work. But if the universe reels — will an eager lad get a second chance?

"DON HARTLEY!" The little blonde secretary's eyes opened wide with curiosity as she repeated his name. *She knows, then,* thought Don.

"Just—just a minute," she said. She picked up the phone and pressed the inter-office button. "Mr. Don Hartley to see you, sir," she announced. Then after a pause, "Yes, sir."

She replaced the receiver, and turned back to Don. "Won't you please have a seat, Mr. Hartley. He'll see you in a moment."

Don sat uncomfortably on the edge of one of the heavy, leather-upholstered chairs. He looked around the beautifully appointed ante-office. The little secretary was trying in vain to be inconspicuous in her curiosity about him. He shifted self-consciously on the chair.

Was he in the right place? Had he really made the right decision? It was a damned difficult thing to figure out!

For the umpteenth time he let

To the best of our knowledge the Metropolitan Opera stage has never before cast its mantle of magic over the science fiction landscape. But with the coming of Ib Melchior to our pages with his first fantasy story its legendary spell has been widened. For Mr. Melchior is the son of a singer so famous that to mention his name would be redundant. Quite as important, Ib Melchior is a motion picture producer as well as a writer, with several TV shows behind him, including the Perry Como Show on CBS. Much of his background and experience as a producer-director is mirrored forth in this most exciting yarn.

his mind wander back twenty-four hours—a measly twenty four hours —when . . .

George Kenmore flipped the talk-back key: "Okay, everybody —wrap it up. That's it for now. Be back here ready to go from the top in exactly one hour and a half."

He turned to the technical director, a large, comfortable man who sat worrying a dead cigar on his left.

"And, Steve," he warned, "don't kill the cameras. Just cap them up so we don't burn in. You and the boys be back here in one hour. I've got a little problem I want to fool around with. That duplicator effect on Ganymede."

He leaned across the control desk toward the row of monitors in front of him on the lower level of the video control room, addressing himself to the top of a crew cut.

"And, Don," he added, "be sure we have horizontal reverse scanning on Camera One. And I want to use the whipe—and also I want you to switch the matting amplifier into the circuit."

The video technician looked up over his shoulder. "Okay, George. You know me. A director's wish is my command! But they sure handed you a tough one this time."

"What do you expect? After all we're doing a space opera—on *live* TV. There are bound to be technical difficulties. As long as they don't ask me for a close-up with the feet in we'll lick any problem they can dream up. Right?"

"Right!" echoed Don brightly. "Anything the movie boys can do with process shooting and laboratory tricks we can do right here in the studio—and better. I'm with *you!*"

George picked up his earphones from the desk and spoke into the tiny mike. "Bill! Bill Sanders! Are you still on cans?"

Out on the studio floor one of the men waved his arm. George saw him through the double glass pane and continued: "Good! Tell the boys to let in the big black in two—in front of the spaceship set. And get the fog machine set. I'm going to use a half hour of fax rehearsal time when we get back for some experimenting. Has the dry ice arrived yet?"

On the floor Bill waved "yes."

"Okay."

"Tell me, George," the T.D. asked. "What exactly is the effect you want in that Ganymede scene?"

George picked up a paper clip and absent-mindedly began twisting it around his pencil in a tight spiral. It was a silly habit of his, but an innocuous one.

"It's like this," he began to explain. "We're on Ganymede—that's one of Jupiter's moons. The 'Planeteer' has landed and is walking around on the satellite in his space suit. We'll play the whole thing in front of the black drop and put in electronic stars."

He leaned over the desk. "Can do, Don?"

"Can do!"

"Fine! Now—the floor will be covered with dry ice fog. It's supposed to be ammonia vapors or some such guck. So far so good."

He rolled his little paper clip spiral off his pencil and started on another one.

"The 'Planeteer' is all alone, see? But suddenly another space-suited figure joins him. It turns out to be *he himself*—and duplicated! And if that's not enough, a third copy joins them—all three of them *he himself*. He's supposed to look at himself, talk to himself, and walk in front of himself. We can't use doubles because of those transparent space helmets. And what's more, the three triplicated 'Planeteers' are supposed to make the exact same movements at the exact same time. The whole thing's supposed to be some sort of hallucination."

He stood up. "And speaking about hallucinations—I'm so hungry *I'm* going to get them if I don't get something to eat. Coming, Steve?"

"Fine," said the T.D.

The director leaned across the desk again. "And how about our *vidiot?* You want to join us, Don?" he asked.

Don cringed mentally at the nickname. Even though he knew it was only a good-natured rib at the video technicians he always winced at the term "vidiot."

But he managed to sound unconcerned when he answered: "Guess not, George. I'm not hungry. Besides I've got a heavy date after the show. I'll just stick around here."

"See you later, then," the director said as he and his T.D. left the control room. On the studio floor Bill, the floor manager, let a last look of inspection sweep the stage. Then he too walked out.

Studio 52 was deserted—except for Don Hartley.

Fine! That would give him a chance. He was pretty sure he knew what the director had in mind, and how he would solve his problem of triplication. If he could have everything set up when George returned the director was bound to send a note of commendation to Barnes, the big brass in the front office. Don was ambitious. He had his eye on the T.D. chair, even on that of the director himself. And who could know? Everything was possible.

Now. He'd use three cameras. Take the first picture of the "Planeteer" on Camera III—normal scanning. Then he'd split the screen vertically on the whipe amplifier, putting the image from Camera III on the right half of the screen. Then on Camera I he'd take another picture of the "Planeteer" and reverse the scanning horizontally so that right became left, and vice versa.

Then he'd put the image from Camera I on the left half of the

split screen, and he'd have two identical "Planeteers" looking at each other. That would work out all right. Now. On Camera II he'd take yet another picture of the "Planeteer," and using the matting amplifier with primary picture on Camera II he could put the third "Planeteer" in front of the two others. It would work. He'd have to try it out.

Don walked out on the stage. From the prop room he got a space suit in a light blue color and propped it up on the Test Pattern stand in front of the black backdrop. That would be the "Planeteer." Next he lined up his two pedestal cameras and swung in the huge boom camera so that all three had a full figure shot of the space suit.

He returned to the control room and completed his intricate hook-up. It worked. One space suit "Planeteer" had become three!

He reached up behind him to punch up his montage picture on the studio monitor so he could watch it out on the floor while he moved around in front of the cameras. As he swept his arm across the desk to the master switchboard there was a tiny scratching sound. This became the sound of an object rolling—and then falling off the desk.

There was a sharp crack and an acrid puff of smoke as one of George's little paper-clip spirals fell down into the exposed mass of tubes and wires of the matting amplifier.

For a split second Don's world stood still. His first reaction was a quick glance at the line monitor. The picture was still there, but—something had happened to it. The matting amplifier worked by "punching" a hole in the image taken by one camera the exact shape of the image taken by a second camera and putting this second image into the hole.

The hole was there all right. It was the exact shape of the propped-up space suit. But it was a hole without an image. It was a hole of utter jet black.

Don knew he ought to kill his B Plus before any more damage was done, but there was something about the total blackness of that hole in the picture on the monitor tube which fascinated him. It simply wasn't possible to get such a perfect black, even if you dug for it. He began cautiously to turn the brightness control. Slowly the blackness became lighter.

All of a sudden an image appeared in the hole! Don worked the contrast control. The picture came swiftly into focus. It was *not* the image of the space suit as it should have been. Through the hole shaped like the space suit Don was looking into the interior of a spaceship!

At once Don's mind supplied an answer. Something had happened to his hook-up when that metal spiral had fallen into the

matting amplifier and fused certain connections! Now he was actually able to pick up images from an extra-terrestrial spaceship! He must be excused, however. He had worked a long time on that TV space opera. And it wasn't long before he realized that what he was actually seeing in the hole was merely the spaceship set built for "The Planeteers." He was about to kill his power when it struck him like a 1000-volt camera shock. How could he *see* the spaceship set? It was *behind* the big black backdrop!

He studied the image on the monitor intently. That was it, all right. No mistake about it. He was looking right *through* the heavy, black duvetyne backdrop with Camera II. Or— He suddenly had a thought.

Don ran out into the studio. Bill usually kept a piece of chalk for floor markings near his cans. There! He went over Camera I. Carefully he drew on the floor a straight line at a 90-degree angle to the lens from the camera over to the black drop. Then he went to Camera II and did the same. The lines did not converge in front of the drop.

He ran behind the black, lifted up the bottom to orientate himself and continued the lines on the other side. They crossed each other right smack in the middle of the spaceship set.

There could only be one answer. But Don had to be sure.

He went back to Camera II and carefully swung it a little to the right. Now the two imaginary lines would cross about 100 feet further out.

He ran back to the control room. And there—in the spacesuit-shaped hole in the monitor image he watched the traffic on the street outside the studio roar silently by! He was seeing through the backdrop, through the scenery stored at the rear of the studio, through the wall itself, and into the street. Wherever the lines from the two cameras would cross—*he saw!* He estimated the focal depth of the picture to be about ten feet on either side of the actual crossing point of the vitally important imaginary lines.

He sat back. He was trembling a little. His hands felt clammy. But he soon got hold of himself. He looked at the control room clock. One thirty-three. The guys would be back in about twenty minutes. He had to hurry. He killed the power, switched on his work lamp, and peered into the innards of the fused, mutilated matting amplifier. From the storing case he hauled out the complete circuit blueprint, and set to work.

The next fifteen minutes were spent in sketching in new connections and bridges and crossing out old ones on the drawings. Then Don carefully fished out the paper clip spiral and deliberately dropped the heavy work light into the

amplifier. There was the sharp noise of splintering tubes.

Stuffing the corrected circuit blueprints in his pocket Don hurriedly left the studio minutes before the crew returned to continue their rehearsal for "The Planeteers."

Don walked quickly through the mid-day crowd towards the park. Barnes would have his hide —first for wrecking the matting amplifier and secondly for walking out on the rehearsal. But he desperately needed time to think. So what if he was fired! It was a *big* thing he'd come across.

He had immediately recognized the tremendous possibilities of his accidental discovery. It had been simple for him to analyze the circuit changes produced by the paper clip spiral and to realize that it would literally be child's play to construct a single camera which could be focused on any given area and pick up an image regardless of whatever obstacles might lay between, unknown to anyone in the area! With this camera he could reach in anywhere with an invisible, all-seeing eye. And he was the only one who had this secret. Reflexively he touched the pocket which held his notes.

He definitely did not want to give this discovery to the network. He still remembered and resented that objectionable clause in his employment contract: *I will assign to you irrevocably any and all rights I may have or get to all "inventions" made by me alone or with others, whether during or outside of my regular working hours.*

Like hell he would! This was one thing that number one boy wasn't giving away. There was a mint to be made—and Donny boy was going to make it!

It was a warm, sunny day. Don hunted up a quiet corner in the park and relaxed on the grass. He had some tall thinking to do.

Let's face it. He had a pure uranium mine on his hands. Just imagine what could be done with it! Entertainment could be plucked right out of the theaters, sports arenas, ball parks, anywhere. News events could be covered immediately and wherever they might occur by a spin of a dial. Even "Person to Person" wouldn't need all that cumbersome equipment! The military could watch war games, attacks, any development, in safety. Why, almost anyone could explore, maybe even discover rich mineral deposits with his new, penetrating TV camera! You could observe the bottom of an ocean and the heart of a mountain. Yes, sir! He would revolutionize TV pick-up and transmission. Maybe even the secrets of space itself—

He felt dizzy. There was no end to the possibilities. And he was sitting on top of the gizmo that would do it! The Hartley Penetelecam! Or simpler still: *The Hartleycam!*

He'd let someone like General

Electric handle it. Possibly RCA. And the right would be his. He'd be a Croesus. Rich as Rothchild. Another Rockefeller! He'd buy up part of this park and put up Hartley Center. And he'd have his office on the entire penthouse floor. The inventor and controller of the Hartleycam! It would be a closely-guarded secret. Like the government's Norden Bomb Sight. Or the H-bomb. The Norden Bomb Sight—the H-bomb—the Hartleycam—the Hartleycam—

"Mr. Hartley! The president will see you now."

A big man. Round owlish eyes behind thin steel-framed spectacles. Did he wear a toupee?

"Sir, when I signed contracts with your corporation to develop and exploit the Hartleycam—"

"Say no more, my boy! I'm with *you!* But it is beyond my control. It has been ever since. Certain government factors have taken over, you know. There is nothing either of us can do. It was too big—too big!"

Of course the president didn't wear a toupee. He was bald.

It showed when he bowed. But not to Don. He was not there. He bowed to the *Hartleycam*—the *Hartleycam*—

"Mr. Hartley! The president will see you now."

A pompous man. A man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. But not recently?

"Sir! As publisher and president of the leading metropolitan newspaper—"

"Sshhh, young man! I know who you are. Don't let too many others find out! Why did you let your spy camera get into the wrong hands? Don't you know it is the unscrupulous, the ruthless who grab power whenever they can? What happens when that power is unconquerable???"

"But I—"

"You gave them the power to penetrate into all places. No more privacy! No more privacy—no more successful opposition to ruthless power."

"Your paper—can't you—"

"The freedom of the press? It is dead. Like all other freedoms—completely dead. You must conform, or else—"

They burst in unannounced. They were grim, and tall, and strong. They had black uniforms with a large silver H on the chest. H?

"I've been expecting you," said the pompous publisher resignedly. "I am ready!"

"And him?" growled one of Them tossing His head at Don.

"He is only Hartley!'

They shrugged—and left . . .

The city was not the city. The people were not the people. There were no smiles, no joy. There were only flesh-and-blood robots with furtive eyes and haunted looks.

And It was everywhere. Watching! He could feel it. Not the deepest dungeon nor the farthest corner

was safe. It was all over him. Like a sticky, hot, unbearable beam, stabbing at his closed eyes, burning his weary brain.

Don sat up with a start. The glaring sun stood overhead. What a fool he'd been to doze off in the sun like that. He'd probably gotten himself a nice burn. No wonder he'd had a nightmare.

He gathered himself up and began walking through the park. He felt sweaty and tired—and disturbed. And he still had to make up his mind. Where to go?

The Network?

Industrial Exploitation?

The Government?

And that had been twenty-four hours earlier.

A buzzer sounded on the little secretary's desk. She was kind of cute at that—for all of her curiosity.

"You may go in now, Mr. Hartley, she announced pleasantly.

He walked towards the door. There was a black sign with white letters: V. P. GENL. ENGINEERING —W. BARNES

He entered.

"Hello, Don," said Barnes seriously, "sit down."

Don leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"Now—what's it all about?"

He had to say it fast, or he might not say it at all.

"I guess I lost my head." He nearly tripped over the words. "I was hooking up the matting amplifier for Mr. Kenmore on the 'Planeteer" show—and I dropped the worklight into it. I thought the whole thing had blown up. I got scared, and—and I just ran out of there. I don't know what came over me. I have no excuse."

He stopped. It was done. There could be no turning back.

Barnes looked at him for a moment. Then his stern face softened.

"Look, Don," he said kindly. "We all have accidents. But we can't afford to panic after every one. Still, it took courage to come here and face up to your mistake like this. I'm going to give you another chance."

He got up and put his hand on Don's shoulder. "Just don't lose your head again," he smiled. "And, Don, we'll take you off 'The Planeteers' for a while. I guess they can get along with another vidiot!"

He slapped Don on the back good-naturedly. In the boy's inside coat pocket a bunch of papers crackled softly. A bunch of papers which held the answer to an electronic device the boy had decided was too big.

The world was not ready for the *Hartleycam.* Not yet.

Not quite yet.

the forerunners

by . . . Norman Arkawy and Stanley Henig

The telepaths were a danger and a threat—to a world grown monstrous. But the human mind can unlock a multitude of doors.

HE FELT IT when he awoke—the dull, persistent throbbing deep within his head—and he knew that no human mind would be closed to him today.

For thirty-two of his thirty-four years Neville Brandt had been a normal person. He had risen rapidly in the Cybernetics Division of Central Metals, Inc., and was now one of the youngest experts in the country. But he was no longer normal.

The throbbing continued while he dressed and while he ate his breakfast. It lingered with him during the drive to the jet port. It hung over him like a mantle of fire while he waited for the express, and it accompanied him aboard.

The jet train screamed along the monorail toward East City. Brandt watched the landscape rush by in a blurred fantasia of color. He stared through the window at the fascinating smear until he became dizzy. And the painful throbbing pounded on in his skull.

The express roared over the Appalachians, soaring up and through the man-made cuts and passes, and

When a stellar navigator as gifted as Norman Arkawy finds a test pilot of Stanley Henig's brilliance seated beside him on a journey to a star the cosmic mists are certain to roll back resplendently. True, THE FORERUNNERS *does not take us on a stellar journey in a strictly literal sense. But it would be carping indeed to insist on that when the cybernetic regions explored therein are so galactic in scope, and so challengingly mysterious.*

then sweeping down the eastern slope with its speed unabated. Still, the pain persisted.

Suddenly it was gone.

Brandt closed his eyes and relaxed into the cushions of his seat, the absence of the nagging pain soothing him like a balm. With his eyes shut, and smiling to himself, he sent telepathic feelers into the minds of his neighbors on the train. Gently, experimentally, his mental fingers touched one mind, then another. Reception was good.

Brandt arrived at Centrals at his usual time. He entered his office and greeted the same busy assemblage of secretaries, clerks and assistants he encountered every morning. Then he promptly settled into his customary work routine.

But there was nothing usual about the way Brandt spent the first few minutes on this particular morning. He was testing his telepathic capacity. He reached out carefully, extending himself until his mind shrieked in agony. Then, with as precise a mental movement as he could manage, he began to slowly extend fringes of his power until he scooped up impressions from the restaurant at the far end of the street.

He held a waiter's thoughts for a moment, then let them go. He probed further, to the bank on the next block. But all he could pick up was a monotonous hum of unintelligible noise. He sagged against the back of his chair until the pounding in his head eased.

Brandt pulled a notebook from his coat pocket and checked his present range limits against the figures which he had entered on his past "spell days." It was still about two hundred yards! His range had apparently stabilized itself at that distance. Only the *duration* of his effective control was increasing. The entries on the page read: March 14—3 min. March 31—12 min. April 19—39 min. June 3—1 hr., 17 min. August 14—2 hr., 58 min. September 24—4 hr., 19 min.

He closed the notebook and carefully tucked it into his breast pocket. Would today, November 4, follow the general pattern? If it did, he knew that he would maintain control for almost eight hours!

He shrugged, turning his attentions to the people around him. Slowly he probed their minds. He crept into dark corners and trod tortuous, narrow paths, never really knowing what marvelous or horrible thing would pop up at the next turning. It was a thrilling game—and sometimes a shocking one. Incredibly primitive and candid at times were the thoughts of the innocent-looking girls, especially the slim brunette at the—

"Mr. Brandt!"

He looked up, startled. His private secretary was standing in front of his desk, and from the annoyed tone of her voice he knew that she must have spoken to him several times in an unsuccessful attempt to gain his attention.

"Yes, Miss Cartwright?" He

spoke guilelessly, pretending to be deeply preoccupied with the papers in his hand.

The girl's eyes seemed to be laughing at him. Brandt wished that he knew what she was thinking. Why, he asked himself for the hundredth time, did Ellen have to be one of the very few people whose minds remained always closed to him? Dear Ellen, aloof Ellen—Miss Cartwright! How he ached to touch her!

Her smile did not change. "Mr. Blanding would like to see you, Mr. Brandt," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

He watched her move back to her desk, concentrating a question at her and getting no response. Shrugging, he arose quickly and left the office.

Blanding greeted him at the door. "Come in, Neville," he said. "I've been expecting you."

With a sudden, sharp apprehensiveness Brandt probed at Blanding's mind. Nothing. It had happened before, and the completeness of the mental shields which were always drawn closely around Blanding and Ellen excited fantastic possibilities. Yet, were they fantastic? If Brandt himself was a neophytic telepath, the probability of there being others more advanced, and with complete control and direction of the power, must surely exist. And why stop at two or three? Why not a well-developed society of telepaths still hidden from the government and successfully avoiding detection?

Brandt stared uneasily at the smiling Blanding and a sudden, overmastering fear pulsed through him.

"Of course, there might be two societies," Blanding said, his expression utterly impassive. "One hidden from the government, and one within the government itself."

All the blood drained from Brandt's face. Blanding knew then. But how—how—

"How? Very simple." Blanding motioned Brandt into a chair and handed him a cigarette. "It's all here," the big man said, tapping his forehead.

Brandt made no attempt to light the cigarette. He simply stared, his pallor almost frightening.

"You've done a remarkable job of logging and extrapolation, Neville," Blanding went on. "But you made one serious mistake—a normal one under the circumstances. You should have used your unique talent as an aid in a search for other telepaths who might have helped you to develop." Blanding pushed his bulky frame out of the chair and walked to the window. "But children are always selfish with a new toy."

He turned to Brandt. "Do you realize that because of your selfish attitude, it took Cartwright and myself six months of quite needless speculative analysis to arrive at the truth about you. I mean, with absolute certainty—"

"So that's it!" Brandt leapt to his feet. "Ellen's one of us!"

Blanding smiled tolerantly. "Yes, that's it. But don't look so startled. We're both master telepaths. Our ability goes far beyond your present stage of development. But once you are caught up, once your attacks disappear—"

"How long have you known?" Brandt asked, cutting him short with an urgent gesture.

"Almost from the first. But I was not absolutely sure, as I've just told you."

"And Ellen?"

"We're a team, Neville. It's our job to find new telepaths and determine their potentials."

Brandt crushed his unlighted cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. "You mentioned *two* societies of telepaths. Which one do you belong to?"

Blanding turned back to the window and spoke slowly. "There's a small but powerful group of master telepaths within the government, whose task is to smoke out men and women who are determined to develop a new and totally different form of society. The government knows the capabilities of free-thinking telepaths, and what a threat they are to the status quo. The people in control of the government don't want our present institutions changed. They don't want to lose their power over the people.

"You see, the average citizen today has been conditioned to accept the almost divine power of the State. His thinking is done for him by those in office. He gets what he needs and never needs what the government doesn't allot him. Only the telepaths question the government's authority, and only the telepaths have the ability to do anything about it."

Blanding paused an instant, then went on: "But the government isn't concerned with what may happen a hundred years from now. Oh, they know telepathy is undoubtedly the next step in human evolution. They know that you and I and all the rest are just the advance guard of the future. But their immediate concern is with the present."

Brandt sat down slowly. "How many known telepaths are there?"

"About seven thousand scattered throughout the country," Blanding replied. "There may be an even larger number of untutored ones like yourself who haven't been discovered yet."

"And now you think I'm ready to join the others?"

"We do—yes."

Brandt leaned eagerly forward in his chair.

"This evening," Blanding answered his unspoken question. "Cartwright and I will take you to meet them."

Brandt returned to his own office, and nervously, impatiently, waited for the day to end. He watched Ellen Cartwright, who remained busily absorbed in her work, and did not once glance his way. He sent feelers out to her

again and again. But she gave no sign that she was aware of them, and when he probed, her mind was still impenetrable.

Toward evening, fatigue set in. He could no longer control his telepathy. But he was accustomed to that—his untutored talent always ran wild after several hours. Kaleidoscopic waves of thought assailed his mind, jabbing at his senses until his head rang with a thousand pulses.

Pain throbbed in his temples and at the base of his skull. Over and over, agonizing shafts of pain shot up to the top of his head until the very hairs on his scalp ached. He clenched his fists and steeled himself to endure the affliction in silence.

Abruptly, the torment ended. He felt empty. His tensed body sagged for an instant and when he opened his eyes everyone had gone. The rooms were still and dark except for the thin, barely visible filament of light that seeped under the closed door of Blanding's private office.

Brandt relaxed in the soothing quiet. Faint murmurings came to him from the busy street below, but they were like gentle lullabies in contrast to the telepathic noise he had just endured.

Presently, Blanding emerged from his office. "Are you ready, Neville?" he asked.

Ellen stood quietly at his side. Her eyes were compassionate and Brandt suddenly realized that she understood what untutored telepathy was like. But was there *more* than pity in her feelings for him? Brandt earnestly hoped so.

He followed them out of the building. The streets were still alive with people, and the sounds of their thoughts began to creep into his mind. Direct and indirect, controlled and uncontrolled, meaningful and meaningless, the thought sounds clashed tumultuously within him.

He stepped onto the sidewalk strip beside Blanding, while Ellen moved quickly to his other side.

Don't go with them! A powerful, directed thought plunged through the noise and echoed forcefully in his mind. *Don't go with them!*

Brandt felt the pressure of Ellen's hand on his arm increase, ever so slightly. For the first time he heard her mental voice speaking to him directly. *Neville. Trust me. You must trust me.*

Don't go! came the warning voice. *They're government people!*

"Spotters!" Ellen's voice was suddenly frightened, unsure. "We will have to hurry." She shuddered and urged him along the walk.

"But that man is a telepath," Brandt objected.

"Of course," Blanding said. "All government spotters are telepaths. How else could they find their quarry?"

Abruptly a searing, wide-open blast of hate, fear and anger washed over Brandt. So intense was it that

he staggered from the shock. Instantly Ellen put her arm about his waist to steady him. As he leaned heavily against her he dimly heard from a far-off cavern of echoes, the sound of voices.

"The fool!" Blanding shouted. "Doesn't he realize that Brandt can't shield himself? Does he *want* to kill him?"

"You know how ruthless they are," Ellen said. "They'd do *anything* to prevent us from adding to our strength. Come on," she urged. "We've got to get him away from here!"

The hate impulses poured in upon Brandt again and again. Mechanically, unconsciously, he allowed Ellen to steer him along the walk to the North Terminal. Her warmth and sympathetic nearness gave him partial shelter from the raging storm of powerful emotion that was driving down upon him like a slashing torrent.

"Get in!" Blanding ordered, holding open the door of a cab. He obeyed mechanically. Ellen climbed in beside him, and Blanding followed. As soon as they were seated, Blanding worked the throttle and they took off.

As they sped away from the city, the turmoil in Brandt's mind grew less acute. Full consciousness returned and he was aware of the tumultuous and conflicting impulses that still lingered, subdued under the blanketing balm of empathy he felt coming from Ellen.

He looked out through the window of the helojet. The night-black countryside was dotted with thousands of tiny lights— the suburban homes of the city workers. The lights wheeled and dipped and air-marker lamps traced out a huge figure nine and an arrow pointing northward toward the spaceport nine hundred miles away. Directly south of the marker patterns lay the immense blackness of the empty city.

Brandt turned to Blanding. "Where—where are we going?" he asked.

"I told you. We're taking you to join the others."

"But *where?*"

Blanding smiled. "There's no harm telling you now," he said. "We're taking you to the Asylum. You'll join the other thousands of telepaths we've taken into custody. You'll be safe there. Safety for you and—safety for the government."

Brandt shouted. "Then that man was right!" He twisted around, in sudden, unbelieving horror. "You *are* from the government." His muscles tensed for an instant as he leaned toward Blanding. Then he hesitated, puzzlement spreading across his face.

Trust me, Neville!

Blanding laughed. "That's all right, Ellen. He's a big boy now. You can drop the act." He sneered at Brandt. "That's right, Neville. We're spotters. There are two kinds of telepaths, you see—idealistic fools like you and government spotters like us. The idealists end up

behind the bars of the Asylums."

Brandt stared incredulously at the man he had worked with and trusted completely. He was like a different man now. He seemed to exude arrogance and contempt.

Brandt brought his fist up, hard. Blanding rolled back against the seat. The jet pitched convulsively. Again and again Brandt struck out blindly, his punches going wild.

Ellen struggled with the controls, bringing the cab level just as Blanding slashed out viciously with the edge of his hand. The blow caught Brandt in the back of the neck and he slumped forward.

"You fool," Blanding taunted. "You could have become one of *us!* But you just didn't have it in you! We probed you very thoroughly."

He glared down at Brandt struggling to rise. "Frankly, I had hoped to be able to recruit you for the Service—it would have been a feather in my cap. But you're an idealist!" He spoke the word with a grimace of contempt. "You're one of those fools who subconsciously believe the drivel concocted for the masses. Equality! Liberty! You can understand why we can't allow people like you to remain at liberty. We can't afford to have too many 'enlightened' people in the unenlightened masses."

"He knows now," Ellen protested. "Leave him alone."

"It's never over with his kind."

Brandt shook his head to clear it, his eyes defiant. "I don't give a damn about—"

"Save it, Neville!" Blanding warned. "It won't do any good. We know you better than you know yourself."

The helojet dipped and glided in to a landing at a brightly lighted field. The landing lamps made a circle of blazing blossoms in the night. The jet settled within the ring and rested like a huge butterfly amidst a bed of tiger lilies.

"This is it," said Blanding.

He opened the door of the jet and hopped to the ground. Brandt followed him. Ellen came up to him and took his hand. He felt her fingers squeeze his.

"You seem confused, Neville," Blanding observed with a laugh. "Is there something you still don't understand?"

Brandt pulled his hand away. "Let's get this over with!" he said angrily.

They walked down a long ramp toward a small circular stone building. There was no courtyard and no fences. High in the walls of the pill-box building were narrow windows in two rows—one at the third and one at the fourth level. The windows of each level alternated with those above and below in a checkerboard pattern that ringed the entire structure.

At the end of the ramp they were halted by a thick block-glass door. As they stood waiting a yellow light flashed on above them, and the door suddenly became transparent. They

faced a battery of deadly iota-ray sprayers.

"Speak one, and identify yourself!" a metallic voice demanded.

"Spotters seventeen and two-sixty-three," Blanding said. "*And* prisoner."

The light blinked, changing from yellow to blue, and the door slowly swung open. Blanding prodded Brandt and the latter moved forward into a small rotunda. He had a fleeting impression that Ellen's hand touched his once, and then . . .

IT WAS a cold, unfriendly room, and Brandt lay on his back on a hard metal cot. His temples were pounding as he stared up at a three-quarter moon that peered in through a high-silled window. Moonlight glowed eerily in the small cubicle, painting the close gray walls with its soft light.

For a chilling moment, Brandt did not know where he was. It was like waking from a bad dream. His pulses throbbed, and he was covered with the cold dampness of fright. Even his limbs seemed pinioned by an intolerable weight.

Then he remembered—up to a point—and an even colder dread of reality settled over him. He was a criminal! When every pretense had been set aside—he was a criminal locked up in a prison. There was no escaping the fact.

He was a telepath, and Blanding and Ellen were telepaths, too. But a dark, cruel gulf yawned between them. The door to his cell slid open noisily and a self-propelled wheel chair rolled in.

"Prisoner will report to R and C at once!" The metallic voice seemed to come from everywhere.

Brandt got off the cot and moved quickly toward the door. The chair rolled in front of him. He stopped and stared at this strange guard on wheels. Then he calmly seated himself. The chair promptly turned about, and moved out into the corridor. The corridor seemed endless. Around and around it stretched on either side of him. The chair turned to the right.

REGISTRATION & CLASSIFICATION

The sign hung above a door before which the chair had stopped. Brandt got off and opened the door. He tripped on the smooth metal bar which was stretched across the doorway, and fell against a tilted examining table. Instantly the table swung to horizontal and slid forward, carrying Brandt into a domed chamber equipped with weird instruments. Bands of nylon swiftly bound him motionless to the table.

An instrument, shining and ominous, lowered toward him. At its tip a needle slid out of its rubber shield. Brandt strained desperately against the bonds. The syringe lowered to his arm, and paused while a correction in angle was made. Then it plunged into his flesh. Brandt gasped. The room spun wildly and a blackness settled over him.

When he awoke, he was in another cubicle—bare except for a chrome table. The nylon bands hung limply across him. He pushed them away and sat up. A light splashed on the table. On it were two badges. One had the number TP-07403 stamped on it. The other read "Observation."

"Pin them on," the voice said. "Number on left breast, classification on right."

Brandt picked up the badges and began to fasten them on his shirt, his hand shaking a little.

"You must wear identification tags at all times," warned the voice. "Prisoner will report to orientation."

Brandt looked about for a door. There was none.

"Get back on the table!" the voice ordered. Brandt obeyed and the table carried him into yet another room.

"Identify yourself!" the metal voice commanded.

"Neville Brandt."

"Identify yourself more explicitly—as a prisoner."

He fumbled at the badge on his shirt, twisting it so that he could read the number.

"TP-07403," the voice said, "you are now under the jurisdiction of the Telepathic Control Board. As a latent telepath, you will be kept under constant observation until such time as your sympathies and ultimate development can be determined. At that time you will be re-classified into one of two major groups—Serviceable or Unserviceable. If you are suitable, you will be inducted into the government service. If not, you will be dealt with accordingly.

"As a loyal citizen, you can readily understand that our policy is in the interest of national welfare, and we know that you will give us your full cooperation throughout your observation period. Failure to do so will, of course, lead to your immediate classification as Unserviceable. Prisoner will now—"

The voice was abruptly interrupted by a grating sound which reminded Neville of a scratchy recording.

Neville! The impulse swept over him suddenly, clearly, unexpectedly. *Listen to me carefully! This is Ellen. Trust me, darling. You must trust me. Follow these directions and I'll explain later.* Brandt fell back against the cold wall as the thoughts pressed in on him. *Go through the door and down the corridor to your left. Take the third door on the right-hand side of the corridor, then follow the stairs—hurry! Hurry, Neville!*

Brandt hesitated.

Please, Neville!

He pushed through the door and ran down the corridor to the stairs. He could not understand Ellen's dual behavior, but he put the thought out of his mind. He had nothing to lose by trusting her implicitly. He bounded down the stairs and fell against a door. It flew open under his weight.

The room was filled with banks of cybernetic controls—and was quite obviously the nerve center of the automatic building! Ellen was moving slowly around a long narrow table that contained the voice units of the huge robot prison. Blanding stood in tight-lipped silence at the far end of the table!

Brandt threw himself at Blanding. They fell to the floor, struggling furiously. Almost instantly, Blanding was in telepathic command. Paralyzing pain seized Brandt and rocked him back against the table. Blanding clambered to his feet. his face contorted with rage. He rushed at Brandt, catching him in the pit of the stomach with his fist.

The blow sucked the blood from Brandt's head and his mind cleared a little. He struck back blindly and felt Blanding stagger backwards. He lunged after the falling man, sprawling on top of him, and pounded his head against the stone floor. Blanding's body relaxed and he stopped struggling.

Brandt got shakily to his feet. Ellen rushed to him. He took her into his arms, and held her tightly.

"It's all right," he comforted her. "It's all right. He waited until she had stopped sobbing before he asked, "How do we get out of here?"

"We must release the others first," Ellen said. "We've got a few minutes before the police can figure out what's happened."

"How many are there here?"

"About two hundred," she told him. "And there are thousands more scattered throughout the country in other places like this."

"What about *them!*" Brandt demanded.

Ellen pointed to the complex machinery in the room. "These controls can be activated to open every cell in the country."

Brandt examined the machinery. It was similar to the cybernetic brain he had developed at Central Metals to control the quality regulators in all the factories at the same time.

Suddenly he was smiling. "Then you planned this whole thing!"

"Yes, Neville. Even the man who almost killed you with his concentrated thoughts this evening. He was planted there for Blanding's benefit."

"But why did you wait this long? Why not two years ago when my telepathy began?"

"That's when our planning began," Ellen said. "When I was certain that you were telepathic, I told our leaders about you. They decided that you were the only one who could set the dials on the 'Brain' properly, and we had to let them get you in here. It wasn't easy to stand by and wait while Blanding watched you compile your notebook.

"This book," Ellen continued, reaching into her purse, "could have been a valuable tool against us. It pinpoints every stage and system of telepathic development. Blan-

ding wanted it as complete as possible before moving against you. Now we'll use it to help train our people."

"Then you knew how I felt about you all along," Brandt whispered.

"I knew—and I feared for you each day. I wanted to tell you who I really was a thousand times—to tell you I loved you. But Blanding would have read you in an instant."

"Ellen, I—"

She reached up and kissed him gently. "Now we must hurry."

Brandt turned back to the dials of the cybernetic brain. He reached out and touched them. And an image flashed across his mind, an image of a thousand doors springing open.

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death between the stars

by . . . Marion Zimmer Bradley

Sympathy may or may not be an invention of the human mind. But in the gulfs between the stars it is likely to work a miracle.

THEY ASKED ME about it, of course, before I boarded the starship. All through the Western sector of the Galaxy, few rules are stricter than the one dividing human from nonhuman, and the little Captain of the *Vesta*—he was Terran, too, and proud in the black leather of the Empire's merchantman forces—hemmed and hawed about it, as much as was consistent with a spaceman's dignity.

"You see, Miss Vargas," he explained, not once but as often as I would listen to him, "this is not, strictly speaking, a passenger ship at all. Our charter is only to carry cargo. But, under the terms of our franchise, we are required to transport an occasional passenger, from the more isolated planets where there is no regular passenger service. Our rules simply don't permit us to discriminate, and the Theradin reserved a place on this ship for our last voyage."

He paused, and re-emphasized, "We have only the one passenger cabin, you see. We're a cargo ship and we are not allowed to make any discrimination between our passengers."

We've had many requests for a sequel to Marion Zimmer Bradley's warmly human, unforgettably appealing little story JACKIE SEES A STAR. *We'll have to admit that she is keeping us in a state of bitter frustration in that respect. But as if to salve our hurt she has come up with a story as appealing in a somewhat different vein, and we're delightfully convinced it will entrance you.*

He looked angry about it. Unfortunately, I'd run up against that attitude before. Some Terrans won't travel on the same ship with nonhumans even when they're isolated in separate ends of the ship.

I understood his predicament, better than he thought. The Theradin seldom travel in space. No one could have foreseen that Haalvordhen, the Theradin from Samarra, who had lived on the forsaken planet of Deneb for eighteen of its cycles, would have chosen this particular flight to go back to its own world.

At the same time, I had no choice. I had to get back to an Empire planet—*any* planet—where I could take a starship for Terra. With war about to explode in the Procyon sector, I had to get home before communications were knocked out altogether. Otherwise—well, a Galactic war can last up to eight hundred years. By the time regular transport service was re-established, I wouldn't be worrying about getting home.

The *Vesta* could take me well out of the dangerous sector, and all the way to Samarra—Sirius Seven — which was, figuratively speaking, just across the street from the Solar System and Terra. Still, it was a questionable solution. The rules about segregation are strict, the anti-discriminatory laws are stricter, and the Theradin had made a prior reservation.

The captain of the *Vesta* couldn't have refused him transportation, even if fifty human, Terran women had been left stranded on Deneb IV. And sharing a cabin with the Theradin was ethically, morally and socially out of the question. Haalvordhen was a nonhuman telepath; and no human in his right senses will get any closer than necessary even to a human telepath. As for a nonhuman one—

And yet, what other way was there?

The captain said tentatively, "We *might* be able to squeeze you into the crewmen's quarters—" he paused uneasily, and glanced up at me.

I bit my lip, frowning. That was worse yet. "I understand," I said slowly, "that this Theradin—Haalvordhen—has offered to allow me to share *its* quarters."

"That's r i g h t. But, Miss Vargas—"

I made up my mind in a rush. "I'll do it," I said. "It's the best way, all around."

At the sight of his scandalized face, I almost regretted my decision. It was going to cause an interplanetary scandal, I thought wryly. A human woman—and a Terran citizen—spending forty days in space and sharing a cabin with a nonhuman!

The Theradin, although male in form, had no single attribute which one could remotely refer to as sex. But of course that wasn't the problem. The nonhuman were specifically prohibited from mingling with the human races. Terran cus-

tom and taboo were binding, and I faced, resolutely, the knowledge that by the time I got to Terra, the planet might be made too hot to hold me.

Still, I told myself defiantly, it was a big Galaxy. And conditions weren't normal just now and that made a big difference. I signed a substantial check for my transportation, and made arrangements for the shipping and stowing of what few possessions I could safely transship across space.

But I still felt uneasy when I went aboard the next day—so uneasy that I tried to bolster up my flagging spirits with all sorts of minor comforts. Fortunately the Theradin were oxygen-breathers, so I knew there would be no trouble about atmosphere-mixtures, or the air pressure to be maintained in the cabin. And the Theradin were Type Two nonhumans, which meant that the acceleration of a hyperspeed ship would knock my shipmate into complete prostration without special drugs. In fact, he would probably stay drugged in his skyhook during most of the trip.

The single cabin was far up toward the nose of the starship. It was a queer little spherical cubbyhole, a nest. The walls were foam-padded all around the sphere, for passengers never develop a spaceman's skill at maneuvering their bodies in free-fall, and cabins had to be designed so that an occupant, moving unguardedly, would not dash out his or her brains against an unpadded surface. Spaced at random on the inside of the sphere were three skyhooks — nested cradles on swinging pivots—into which the passenger was snugged during blastoff in shock-absorbing foam and a complicated Garensen pressure-apparatus and was thus enabled to sleep secure without floating away.

A few screw-down doors were marked LUGGAGE. I immediately unscrewed one door and stowed my personal belongings in the bin. Then I screwed the top down securely and carefully fastened the padding over it. Finally, I climbed around the small cubbyhole, seeking to familiarize myself with it before my unusual roommate arrived.

It was about fourteen feet in diameter. A sphincter lock opened from the narrow corridor to cargo bays and crewmen's quarters, while a second led into the cabin's functional equivalent of a bathroom. Planetbound men and women are always surprised and a little shocked when they see the sanitary arrangements on a spaceship. But once they've tried to perform normal bodily functions in free-fall, they understand the peculiar equipment very well.

I've made six trips across the Galaxy in as many cycles. I'm practically an old hand, and can even wash my face in free-fall without drowning. The trick is to use a sponge and suction. But, by and large, I understand perfectly why

spacemen, between planets, usually look a bit unkempt.

I stretched out on the padding of the main cabin, and waited with growing uneasiness for the nonhuman to show up. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the diaphragm on the outer sphincter-lock expanded, and a curious, peaked face peered through.

"Vargas Miss Hel-len?" said the Theradin in a sibilant whisper.

"That's my name," I replied instantly. I pulled myself upward, and added, quite unnecessarily, "You are Haalvordhen, of course."

"Such is my identification," confirmed the alien, and the long, lean, oddly-muscled body squirmed through after the peaked head. "It is kind, Vargas Miss, to share accom-modation under this necessity."

"It's kind of you," I said vigorously. "We've all got to get home before this war breaks out!"

"That war may be prevented, I have all hope," the nonhuman said. He spoke comprehensibly in Galactic Standard, but expressionlessly, for the vocal chords of the Theradins are located in an auxiliary pair of inner lips, and their voices seem reedy and lacking in resonance to human ears.

"Yet know you, Vargas Miss, they would have hurled me from this ship to make room for an Empire citizen, had you not been heart-kind to share."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, shocked, "I didn't know that!"

I stared at him, disbelieving. The captain couldn't have legally done such a thing—or even seriously have entertained the thought. Had he been trying to intimidate the Theradin into giving up his reserved place?

"I—I was meaning to thank *you,*" I said, to cover my confusion.

"Let us thank we-other, then, and be in accord," the reedy voice mouthed.

I looked the nonhuman over, unable to hide completely my curiosity. In form the Theradin was vaguely humanoid—but only vaguely—for, the squat arms terminated in mittened "hands" and the long sharp face was elfin, and perpetually grimacing.

The Theradin have no facial muscles to speak of, and no change of expression or of vocal inflection is possible to them. Of course, being telepathic, such subtleties of visible or auditory expression would be superfluous on the face of it.

I felt—as yet—none of the revulsion which the mere presence of the Theradin was *supposed* to inspire. It was not much different from being in the presence of a large humanoid animal. There was nothing inherently fearful about the alien. Yet he was a telepath—and of a nonhuman breed my species had feared for a thousand years.

Could he read my mind?

"Yes," said the Theradin from across the cabin. "You must forgive me. I try to put up barrier, but it

is hard. You broadcast your thought so strong it is impossible to shut it out." The alien paused. "Try not to be embar-rass. It bother me too."

Before I could think of anything to say to that a crew member in black leather thrust his head, unannounced, through the sphincter, and said with an air of authority, "In skyhooks, please." He moved confidently into the cabin. "Miss Vargas, can I help you strap down?" he asked.

"Thanks, but I can manage," I told him.

Hastily I clambered into the skyhook, buckling the inner straps, and fastening the suction tubes of the complicated Garensen apparatus across my chest and stomach. The nonhuman was awkwardly drawing his hands from their protective mittens and struggling with the Garensens.

Unhappily the Theradin have a double thumb, and handling the small-size Terran equipment is an almost impossibly delicate task. It is made more difficult by the fact that the flesh of their "hands" is mostly thin mucus membrane which tears easily on contact with leather and raw metal.

"Give Haalvordhen a hand," I urged the crewman. "I've done this dozens of times!"

I might as well have saved my breath. The crewman came and assured himself that *my* straps and tubes and cushions were meticulously tightened. He took what seemed to me a long time, and used his hands somewhat excessively. I lay under the heavy Garensen equipment, too inwardly furious to even give him the satisfaction of protest.

It was far too long before he finally straightened and moved toward Haalvordhen's skyhook. He gave the alien's outer straps only a perfunctory tug or two, and then turned his head to grin at me with a totally uncalled-for familiarity.

"Blastoff in ninety seconds," he said, and wriggled himself rapidly out through the lock.

Haalvordhen exploded in a flood of Samarran which I could not follow. The vehemence of his voice, however, was better than a dictionary. For some strange reason I found myself sharing his fury. The unfairness of the whole procedure was shameful. The Theradin had paid passage money, and deserved in any case the prescribed minimum of decent attention.

I said forthrightly, "Never mind the fool, Haalvordhen. Are you strapped down all right?"

"I don't know," he replied despairfully. "The equipment is unfamiliar—"

"Look—" I hesitated, but in common decency I had to make the gesture. "If I examine carefully my own Garensens, can you read my mind and see how they should be adjusted?"

He mouthed, "I'll try," and immediately I fixed my gaze steadily on the apparatus.

After a moment, I felt a curious sensation. It was something like the

faint, sickening feeling of being touched and pushed about, against my will, by a distasteful stranger.

I tried to control the surge of almost physical revulsion. No wonder that humans kept as far as possible from the telepathic races . . .

And then I saw—did I *see,* I wondered, or was it a direct telepathic interference with my perceptions?—a second image superimpose itself on the Garensens into which I was strapped. And the realization was so disturbing that I forgot the discomfort of the mental rapport completely.

"You aren't nearly fastened in," I warned. "You haven't begun to fasten the suction tubes—oh, *damn* the man. He must have seen in common humanity—" I broke off abruptly, and fumbled in grim desperation with my own straps. "I think there's just time—"

But there wasn't. With appalling suddenness a violent clamor—the final warning—hit my ears. I clenched my teeth and urged frantically: "Hang on! Here we go!"

And then the blast hit us! Under the sudden sickening pressure I felt my lungs collapse, and struggled to remain upright, choking for breath. I heard a queer, gagging grunt from the alien, and it was far more disturbing than a human scream would have been. Then the second shockwave struck with such violence that I screamed aloud in completely human terror. Screamed — and blacked out.

I wasn't unconscious very long. I'd never collapsed during takeoff before, and my first fuzzy emotion when I felt the touch of familiar things around me again was one of embarrassment. What had happened? Then, almost simultaneously, I became reassuringly aware that we were in free fall and that the crewman who had warned us to alert ourselves was stretched out on the empty air near my skyhook. He looked worried.

"Are you all right, Miss Vargas?" he asked, solicitously. "The blastoff wasn't any rougher than usual—"

"I'm all right," I assured him woozily. My shoulders jerked and the Garensens shrieked as I pressed upward, undoing the apparatus with tremulous fingers. "What about the Theradin?" I asked urgently. "His Garensens weren't fastened. You barely glanced at them."

The crewman spoke slowly and steadily, with a deliberation I could not mistake. "Just a minute, Miss Vargas," he said. "Have you forgotten? I spent *every moment* of the time I was in here fastening the Theradin's belts and pressure equipment."

He gave me a hand to assist me up, but I shook it off so fiercely that I flung myself against the padding on the opposite side of the cabin. I caught apprehensively at a handhold, and looked down at the Theradin.

Haalvordhen lay flattened beneath the complex apparatus. His peaked pixie face was shrunken

and ghastly, and his mouth looked badly bruised. I bent closer, then jerked upright with a violence that sent me cascading back across the cabin, almost into the arms of the crewman.

"You must have fixed those belts *just now,*" I said accusingly. "They *were not* fastened before blastoff! It's malicious criminal negligence, and if Haalvordhen dies—"

The crewman gave me a slow, contemptuous smile. "It's my word against yours, sister," he reminded me.

"In common decency, in common humanity—" I found that my voice was hoarse and shaking, and could not go on.

The crewman said humorlessly, "I should think you'd be glad if the geek died in blastoff. You're awfully concerned about the geek —and you know how *that* sounds?"

I caught the frame of the skyhook and anchored myself against it. I was almost too faint to speak. "What were you trying to do?" I brought out at last. "*Murder* the Theradin?"

The crewman's baleful gaze did not shift from my face. "Suppose you close your mouth," he said, without malice, but with an even inflection that was far more frightening. "If you don't, we may have to close it for you. I don't think much of humans who fraternize with geeks."

I opened and shut my mouth several times before I could force myself to reply. All I finally said was, "You know, of course, that I intend to speak to the captain?"

"Suit yourself." He turned and strode contemptuously toward the door. "We'd have been doing you a favor if the geek had died in blastoff. But, as I say, suit yourself. I think your geek's alive, anyhow. They're hard to kill."

I clutched the skyhook, unable to move, while he dragged his body through the sphincter lock and it contracted behind him.

Well, I thought bleakly, I had known what I would be letting myself in for when I'd made the arrangement. And since I was already committed, I might as well see if Haalvordhen were alive or dead. Resolutely I bent over his skyhook, angling sharply to brace myself in free-fall.

He wasn't dead. While I looked I saw the bruised and bleeding "hands" flutter spasmodically. Then, abruptly, the alien made a queer, rasping noise. I felt helpless and for some reason I was stirred to compassion.

I bent and laid a hesitant hand on the Garensen apparatus which was now neatly and expertly fastened. I was bitter about the fact that for the first time in my life I had lost consciousness! Had I not done so the crewman could not have so adroitly covered his negligence. But it was important to remember that the circumstance would not have helped Haalvordhen much either.

"Your feelings do you nothing

but credit!" The reedy flat voice was almost a whisper. "If I may trespass once more on your kindness—can you unfasten these instruments again?"

I bent to comply, asking helplessly as I did so, "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Very far from all right," the alien mouthed, slowly and without expression.

I had the feeling that he resented being compelled to speak aloud, but I didn't think I could stand that telepath touch again. The alien's flat, slitted eyes watched me while I carefully unfastened the suction tubes and cushioning devices.

At this distance I could see that the eyes had lost their color, and that the raw "hands" were flaccid and limp. There were also heavily discolored patches about the alien's throat and head. He pronounced, with a terribly thick effort.

"I should have—been drugged. Now it's too late. *Argha maci—*" the words trailed off into blurred Samarran but the discolored patch in his neck still throbbed sharply, and the hands twitched in an agony which, being dumb, seemed the more fearful

I clung to the skyhook, dismayed at the intensity of my own emotion. I thought that Haalvordhen had spoken again when the sharp jolt of command sounded, clear and imperative, in my brain.

"Procalamine!" For an instant the shock was all I could feel—the shock, and the overwhelming revulsion at the telepathic touch. There was no hesitation or apology in it now, for the Theradin was fighting for his life. Again the sharp, furious command came: *"Give me procalamine!"*

And with a start of dismay I realized that most nonhumans needed the drug, which was kept on all spaceships to enable them to live in free-fall.

Few nonhuman races have the stubbornly persistent heart of the Terrans, which beats by muscular contraction alone. The circulation of the Theradin, and similar races, is dependent on gravity to keep the vital fluid pulsing. Procalamine gives their main blood organ just enough artificial muscular spasm to keep the blood moving and working.

Hastily I propelled myself into the "bathroom"—wriggled hastily through the diaphragm, and unscrewed the top of the bin marked FIRST AID. Neatly pigeonholed beneath transparent plastic were sterile bandages, antiseptics clearly marked HUMAN and—separately, for the three main types of nonhuman races, in one deep bin—the small plastic globules of vital stimulants.

I sorted out two purple fluorescent ones—little globes marked *procalamine*—and looked at the warning, in raised characters on the globule. It read: FOR ADMINISTRATION BY QUALIFIED SPACE PERSONNEL ONLY. A touch of panic made my diaphragm

catch. Should I call the *Vesta*'s captain, or one of the crew?

Then a cold certainty grew in me. If I did, Haalvordhen wouldn't get the stimulant he needed. I sorted out a fluorescent needle for nonhuman integument, pricked the globule and sucked the dose into the needle. Then, with its tip still enclosed in the plastic globe, I wriggled myself back to where the alien still lay loosely confined by one of the inner straps.

Panic touched me again, with the almost humorous knowledge that I didn't know where to inject the stimulant, and that a hypodermic injection, in space presents problems which only space-trained men are able to cope with. But I reached out notwithstanding and gingerly picked up one of the unmittened "hands." I didn't stop to think how I knew that this was the proper site for the injection. I was too overcome with strong physical loathing.

Instinct from man's remote past on Earth told me to drop the nonhuman flesh and cower, gibbering and howling as my simian antecedents would have done. The raw membrane was feverishly hot and unpleasantly slimy to touch. I fought rising queasiness as I tried to think how to steady him for the injection.

In free-fall there is no steadiness, no direction. The hypodermic needle, of course, worked by suction, but piercing the skin would be the big problem. Also, I was myself succumbing to the dizziness of no-gravity flight, and realized coldly that if I couldn't make the injection in the next few minutes I wouldn't be able to accomplish it at all.

For a minute I didn't care, a primitive part of myself reminding me that if the alien died I'd be rid of a detestable cabinmate, and have a decent trip between planets.

Then, stubbornly, I threw off the temptation. I steadied the needle in my hand, trying to conquer the disorientation which convinced me that I was looking both up and down at the Theradin.

My own center of gravity seemed to be located in the pit of my stomach, and I fought the familiar space voyaging instinct to curl up in the foetal position and float. I moved slightly closer to the Theradin. I knew that if I could get close enough, our two masses would establish a common center of gravity, and I would have at least a temporary orientation while I made the injection.

The maneuver was unpleasant, for the alien seemed unconscious, flaccid and still, and mere physical closeness to the creature was repellent. The feel of the thick wettish "hand" pulsing feebly in my own was almost sickeningly intimate. But at last I managed to maneuver myself close enough to establish a common center of gravity between us—an axis on which I seemed to hover briefly suspended.

I pulled Haalvordhen's "hand" into this weight-center in the bare inches of space between us, braced the needle, and resolutely stabbed with it.

The movement disturbed the brief artificial gravity, and Haalvordhen floated and bounced a little weightlessly in his skyhook. The "hand" went sailing back, the needle recoiling harmlessly. I swore out loud, now quite foolishly angry, and my own jerky movement of annoyance flung me partially across the cabin.

Inching slowly back, I tried to grit my teeth, but only succeeded with a snap that jarred my skull. In terse anger, I seized Haalvordhen's "hand," which had almost stopped its feverish pulsing, and with a painfully slow effort—any quick or sudden movement would have thrown me, in recoil, across the cabin again—I wedged Haalvordhen's "hand" under the strap and anchored it there.

It twitched faintly—the Theradin was apparently still sensible to pain—and my stomach rose at that sick pulsing. But I hooked my feet under the skyhook's frame, and flung my free arm down and across the alien, holding tight to the straps that confined him.

Still holding him thus wedged down securely, I jabbed again with the needle. It touched, pricked—and then, in despair, I realized it could not penetrate the Theradin integument without weight and pressure behind it.

I was too absorbed now in what had to be done to care just how I did it. So I wrenched forward with a convulsive movement that threw me, full-length, across the alien's body. Although I still had no weight, the momentum of the movement drove the hypodermic needle deeply into the flesh of the "hand."

I pressed the catch, then picked myself up slowly, and looked around to see the crewman who had jeered at me with his head thrust through the lock again, regarding me with the distaste he had displayed toward the Theradin from the first. To him I was lower than the Theradin, having degraded myself by close contact with a nonhuman.

Under that frigid, contemptuous stare, I was unable to speak. I could only silently withdraw the needle and hold it up. The rigid look of condemnation altered just a little, but not much. He remained silent, looking at me with something halfway between horror and accusation.

It seemed years, centuries, eternities that he clung there, just looking at me, his face an elongated ellipse above the tight collar of his black leathers. Then, without even speaking, he slowly withdrew his head and the lock contracted behind him, leaving me alone with my sickening feel of contamination and an almost hysterical guilt.

I hung the needle up on the air, curled myself into a ball, and, entirely unstrung, started sobbing like a fool.

It must have been a long time before I managed to pull myself together, because before I even looked to see whether Haalvordhen was still alive, I heard the slight buzzing noise which meant it was a meal-period and that food had been sent through the chute to our cabin. I pushed the padding listlessly aside, and withdrew the heat-sealed containers—one set colorless, the other set nonhuman fluorescent.

Tardily conscious of what a fool I'd been making of myself, I hauled my rations over to the skyhook, and tucked them into a special slot, so that they wouldn't float away. Then, with a glance at the figure stretched out motionless beneath the safety-strap of the other skyhook, I shrugged, pushed myself across the cabin again, and brought the fluorescent containers to Haalvordhen.

He made a weary, courteous noise which I took for acknowledgment. By now heartily sick of the whole business, I set them before him with a bare minimum of politeness and withdrew to my own skyhook, occupying myself with the always-ticklish problem of eating in free-fall.

At last I drew myself up to return the containers to the chute, knowing we wouldn't leave the cabin during the entire trip. Space, on a starship, is held to a rigid minimum. There is simply no room for untrained outsiders moving around in the cramped ship, perhaps getting dangerously close to critically delicate equipment, and the crew is far too busy to stop and keep an eye on rubbernecking tourists.

In an emergency, passengers can summon a crewman by pressing a call-button. Otherwise, as far as the crew was concerned, we were in another world.

I paused in midair next to Haalvordhen's skyhook. His containers were untouched and I felt moved to say, "Shouldn't you try to eat something?"

The flat voice had become even weaker and more rasping now, and the nonhuman's careful enunciation was slurred. Words of his native Samarran intermingled with queer turns of phrase which I expected were literally rendered from mental concepts.

"Heart-kind of you, *thakkava* Vargas Miss, but late. Haalvordhen-I deep in grateful wishing—" A long spate of Samarran, thickly blurred followed, then as if to himself, "Theradin-we, die nowhere only on Samarra, and only a little time ago Haalvordhen-I knowing must die, and must returning to home planet. *Saata.* Knowing to return and die there where Theradin-we around dying—" The jumble of words blurred again, and the limp "hands" clutched spasmodically, in and out.

Then, in a queer, careful tone, the nonhuman said, "But I am not living to return where I can stop-die. Not so long Haalvorden-I be lasting, although Vargas-you Miss be helping most like *real* instead

of alien. Sorry your people be most you unhelping—" he stopped again, and with a queer little grunting noise, continued, "Now Haalvordhen-I be giving Vargas-you stop-gift of heritage, be needful it is."

The flaccid form of the nonhuman suddenly stiffened, went rigid. The drooping lids over the Theradin's eyes seemed to unhood themselves, and in a spasm of fright I tried to fling myself backward. But I did not succeed. I remained motionless, held in a dumb fascination.

I felt a sudden, icy cold, and the sharp physical nausea crawled over me again at the harsh and sickening touch of the alien on my mind, not in words this time, but in a rapport even closer—a hateful touch so intimate that I felt my body go limp in helpless fits and spasms of convulsive shuddering under the deep, hypnotic contact.

Then a wave of darkness almost palpable surged up in my brain. I tried to scream, *"Stop it, stop it!"* And a panicky terror flitted in my last conscious thought through my head. *This is why, this is the reason humans and telepaths don't mix—*

And then a great dark door opened under my senses and I plunged again into unconsciousness.

IT WAS not more than a few seconds, I suppose, before the blackness swayed and lifted and I found myself floating, curled helplessly in mid-air, and seeing, with a curious detachment, the Theradin's skyhook below me. Something in the horrid limpness of that form stirred me wide awake.

With a tight band constricting my breathing, I arrowed downward. I had never seen a dead Theradin before, but I needed no one to tell me that I saw one now. The constricting band still squeezed my throat in dry gasps, and in a frenzy of hysteria I threw myself wildly across the cabin, beating and battering on the emergency button, shrieking and sobbing and screaming . . .

They kept me drugged all the rest of the trip. Twice I remember waking and shrieking out things I did not understand myself, before the stab of needles in my arm sent me down into comforting dreams again. Near the end of the flight, while my brain was still fuzzy, they made me sign a paper, something to do with witnessing that the crew held no responsibility for the Theradin's death.

It didn't matter. There was something clear and cold and shrewd in my mind, behind the surface fuzziness, which told me I must do exactly what they wanted, or I would find myself in serious trouble with the Terran authorities. At the time I didn't even care about that, and supposed it was the drugs. Now, of course, I know the truth.

When the ship made planetfall at Samarra, I had to leave the *Vesta* and trans-ship for Terra. The *Vesta*'s little captain shook me by the hand and carefully avoided my

eyes, without mentioning the dead Theradin. I had the feeling—strange, how clear it was to my perceptions—that he regarded me in the same way he would regard a loaded time bomb that might explode at any moment.

I knew he was anxious to hurry me aboard a ship for Terra. He offered me special reservations on a linocruiser at a nominal price, with the obvious lie that he owned a part interest in it. Detachedly I listened to his floundering lies, ignored the hand he offered again, and told a lie or two of my own. He was angry. I knew he didn't want me to linger on Samarra.

Even so, he was glad to be rid of me.

Descending at last from the eternal formalities of the Terran landing zone, I struck out quickly across the port city and hailed a Theradin ground-car. The Theradin driving it looked at me curiously, and in a buzzing voice informed me that I could find a human conveyance at the opposite corner. Surprised at myself, I stopped to wonder what I was doing. And then—

And then I identified myself in a way the Theradin could not mistake. He was nearly as surprised as I was. I clambered into the car, and he drove me to the queer, block-shaped building which my eyes had never seen before, but which I now knew as intimately as the blue sky of Terra.

Twice, as I crossed the twisting ramp, I was challenged. Twice, with the same shock of internal surprise, I answered the challenge correctly.

At last I came before a Theradin whose challenge crossed mine like a sure, sharp lance, and the result was startling. The Theradin Haalvamphrenan leaned backward twice in acknowledgment, and said—not in words—"Haalvordhen!"

I answered in the same fashion. "Yes. Due to certain blunders, I could not return to our home planet, and was forced to use the body of this alien. Having made the transfer unwillingly, under necessity, I now see certain advantages. Once within this body, it does not seem at all repulsive, and the host is highly intelligent and sympathetic.

"I regret the feeling that I am distasteful to you, dear friend. But, consider. I can now contribute my services as messenger and courier, without discrimination by these mind-blind Terrans. The law which prevents Theradin from dying on any other planet should now be changed."

"Yes, yes," the other acquiesced, quickly grasping my meaning. "But now to personal matters, my dear Haalvordhen. Of course your possessions are held intact for you."

I became aware that I possessed five fine residences upon the planet, a private lake, a grove of Theirry-trees, and four hattel-boats. Inheritance among the Theradin, of course, is dependent upon continuity of the mental personality, regardless of the

source of the young. When any Theradin died, transferring his mind into a new and younger host, the new host at once possessed all of those things which had belonged to the former personality. Two Theradin, unsatisfied with their individual wealth, sometimes pooled their personalities into a single host-body, thus accumulating modest fortunes.

Continuity of memory, of course, was perfect. As Helen Vargas, I had certain rights and privileges as a Terran citizen, certain possessions, certain family rights, certain Empire privileges. And as Haalvordhen, I was made free of Samarra as well.

In a sense of strict justice, I "told" Haalvamphrenan how the original host had died. I gave him the captain's name. I didn't envy him, when the *Vesta* docked again at Samarra.

"On second thought," Haalvamphrenan *said* reflectively, "I shall merely commit suicide in his presence."

Evidently Helen-Haalvordhen-I had a very long and interesting life ahead of me.

So did all the other Theradin.



There's a real treat for science fantasy fans in the current issue of our companion magazine, THE SAINT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE. *In his introduction Mr. Leslie Charteris has this to say about one of the authors in the issue: "To the ever-lengthening roster of writers from other fields who have insisted on climbing over the fence into our pasture must now be added the name of* THEODORE STURGEON. *No virgin to the writing game, this Sturgeon needs no introduction to those of you who also read our companion monthly,* FANTASTIC UNIVERSE; *but to the ignorant others I suppose I must explain that he is one of the top science-fiction specialists of our day. Now he turns up with a first for* THE SAINT—THE HALF-WAY TREE MURDER, *and proves that Mr. Sturgeon can deal just as deftly with crime as with spaceships and banshees." Need we say more?* THE SAINT'S *on sale where you bought this.*

the skag castle

by . . . Robert Sheckley

If you're planning to operate an interplanetary decontaminating service—be warned! Ghosts aren't half as eerie as Undead Scarbs.

WITHIN THE offices of the AAA Ace Interplanetary Decontamination Service, a gloomy silence reigned. By the faint light that filtered through the dirty windows, Richard Gregor was playing a new form of solitaire. It involved three packs of cards, six jokers, a set of dice and a slide rule. The game was extremely complicated, maddeningly difficult, and always came out if you persisted long enough.

His partner, Mike Arnold, had swept his desk clear of its usual clutter of crusty test tubes and unpaid bills, and was now dozing fitfully on its stained surface.

Business couldn't have been worse.

There was a tentative knock on the door.

Quickly Gregor pushed his playing cards, dice and slide rule into a drawer. Arnold rolled off his desk like a cat and flipped open volume two of Terkstiller's *Decontamination Modes on X-32* (Omega) *Worlds,* which he had been using for a pillow.

Scarcely two years have gone by since Robert Sheckley took off for fame and fortune from a science fantasy springboard. Like Evan Hunter, of BLACKBOARD JUNGLE *renown, he is a quite young writer with an astoundingly versatile approach to life and letters. It is gratifying to observe that neither of these two gifted writers have abandoned the original springboard, but have returned to it again and again. And just to consolidate the way we feel about him, here's a Sheckley yarn that warms us from space helmet to brogan.*

"Come in," Gregor called out.

The door opened, and a girl entered. She was young, slender, dark-haired, and extremely pretty. Her eyes were gray, and they contained a hint of fear. Her lips were unsmiling.

She looked around the unkempt office. "Is this the AAA Ace?" she inquired tentatively.

"It certainly is," Gregor assured her. "Won't you sit down? We always keep the lights off. Much more restful, don't you think?"

And, he thought, quite necessary, since Con Mazda had shut off their power last week for nonpayment of a trifling bill.

"I suppose it is," the girl said, sitting in the cavernous client's chair. She surveyed the office again. "You people *are* planetary decontaminationists, aren't you? Not taxidermists, or undertakers?"

"Don't let the office fool you," Arnold said. "We are the best, and the most reasonable. No planet too big, no asteroid too small, and every job gets our personal attention," he added, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Maybe I've come to the right place after all," the girl said, with a wan but enchanting smile. "You see, I don't have much money."

Gregor nodded sympathetically. AAA Ace's clients never had much money.

"But I do have a tiny little planet which needs decontaminating," the girl said. "It's the most wonderful place in the whole galaxy. But the job might be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Arnold asked.

The girl nodded and glanced nervously at the door. "I don't even know if I'm safe here. Are you armed?"

Gregor found a rusty letter opener. Arnold hefted a bronze paperweight cast in the shape of the spaceship *Constitution*—a beautiful piece of workmanship.

Somewhat relieved, the girl went on. "I'm Myra Branch Ryan, and the whole thing started like this. I was on my little planet, minding my own business, when suddenly this Scarb appeared before me, leering horribly—"

"This what?"

"Perhaps I should start at the beginning," Myra Ryan said. "A few months ago my Uncle Jim died and left me a small planet and a Hemstet 4 spaceship. The planet is Coelle, in the Gelsors system. Uncle Jim bought the planet fifteen years ago, for a vacation home. He had just gotten it into shape when he was called away on business. What with one thing and another, he never returned. Naturally I went out there as soon as I could."

Myra's face brightened as she remembered her first impressions.

"Coelle was very small, but perfect. It had a complete air system, the best gravity money can buy, and an artesian well. Uncle Jim had planted several orchards, and berry bushes on the hillsides, and

long grass everywhere. There was even a little lake.

"But Coelle's outstanding feature was the Skag Castle. Uncle Jim hadn't touched this, for the castle was old beyond belief. It was thought to have been built by the Skag Horde, who, according to legend, occupied the universe before the coming of man."

The partners nodded. Everyone had heard of the Skag Horde. A whole literature had sprung up around the scanty evidence of their existence. It was pretty well established that they had been reptile-evolved, and had mastered space-flight. But legend went further than this. The Skag Horde was supposed to have known the Old Lore, a strange mixture of science and witchcraft. This, according to the legends, gave them a power beyond the conception of man, powers sprung from the evil counterforces of the universe.

Their disappearance, millennia before *homo sapiens* descended from the treetops, had never been satisfactorily explained.

"I fell in love with Coelle," Myra continued, "and the old Skag Castle just made it perfect."

"But where does the decontaminating come in?" Gregor asked. "Were there natives on Coelle? Animals? Germs?"

"No, nothing like that," Myra said. "Here's what happened . . ."

She had been on her planet a week, exploring its groves and orchards, and wandering around the Skag Castle. Then one evening, sitting in the castle's great library, she sensed something wrong. There was an unearthly stillness in the air, as though the planet were waiting for something to happen. Angrily she tried to shake off the mood. It was just nerves, she told herself. After she put a few more lights in the halls, and changed the blood-red draperies to something gayer—

Then she heard a dull rumbling noise, like the sound of a giant walking. It seemed to come from beneath her, from somewhere in the solid granite upon which the castle rested.

But that, of course, was impossible.

She stood completely still, waiting. The floor vibrated, a vase crept off a table and shattered on the flagstones. And then the Scarb appeared before her, leering horribly.

There was no mistaking it. According to legend, the Scarbs had been the wizard-scientists of the vanished Skag Horde; great, powerful reptiles dressed in cloaks of gray and purple. The creature that stood before Myra was over nine feet tall, with tiny atrophied wings and a horn growing from its forehead.

The Scarb said, "Earthwoman, go home!"

She almost fainted. The Scarb continued, "Know, rash human, that this planet of Coelle is the ancestral home of the Skag Horde,

and this Castle is the original Skag Burrow. Here the spirit of the Skag still lives, through the intervention of Grad, Ieele, and other accursed powers of the universe. Quit this sacred planet at once, foolish human, or I, the *Undead Scarb,* will exact revenge."

And with that, it vanished.

"What did you do?" Gregor asked.

"Nothing," Myra said, with a little laugh. "I just couldn't believe it. I thought I must have had a hallucination, and everything would be all right if I just got control of myself. Twice more that week I heard the underground noises. And then the Scarb appeared again. He said, 'You have been warned, Earthwoman. Now beware the wrath of the Undead Scarb!' After that, I got out as fast as I could."

Myra sniffed, took out a little handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"So you see," she said, "my little planet needs decontaminating. Or possibly exorcising."

"Miss Ryan," Gregor said, very gently, "I don't mean to be insulting, but have you—ah—did you ever think of consulting a psychiatrist?"

The girl stood up angrily. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Not at all," Gregor said soothingly. "But remember, you yourself spoke of the possibility of hallucination. After all, a deserted planet, an ancient castle, these legends—which, by the way, have very little basis in fact—all would tend to—"

"You're right, of course," Myra said, with a strange little smile. "But how do you explain this?" She opened her handbag and spilled three cans of film and a spool of magnetic tape onto Gregor's desk.

"I was able to *record* some of those hallucinations," she said.

The partners were momentarily speechless.

"Something is going on in that castle," Myra said earnestly. "It calls itself an Undead Scarb. Won't you get rid of it for me?"

Gregor groaned and rubbed his forehead. He hated to refuse anyone as beautiful as Miss Ryan, and they certainly could use the income. But this was not, in all honesty, a job for decontaminators. This looked like a psychic case, and psychic phenomena was notoriously tricky stuff to handle. It was all so intangible.

"Miss Ryan—" he began, but Arnold broke in.

"We would be delighted to take your case," he said. To Gregor he gave an I'll-explain-later wink.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Myra said. "How soon will you be ready?"

"As a rule," Arnold said, "we need a few weeks notice. But for you—" He beamed fatuously. "For you, we are going to clear our calendar, postpone all other cases, and begin at once."

Gregor's long, sad face was un-

happier than ever. "Perhaps you've forgotten," he told his partner. "Joe the Interstellar Junkman has our spaceship, due to a trifling bill we neglected to pay. I'm sorry, Miss Ryan—"

"Call me Myra," Myra said. "That's all right, my *Hemstet 4* is fueled and ready to go."

"Then we'll leave tonight," Arnold said. "Have no fear, Myra. Your little planet is safe in our hands. We'll radio you as soon as—"

"Radio nothing," Myra said. "I'm going along. I wouldn't miss this for anything."

They arranged for Myra to obtain the clearances, and meet them back at the office. As she walked to the door, Arnold said, "By the way, why did you ask if we were armed?"

She was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Since I came back to Terra, something's been following me. Something wearing gray and purple. I'm afraid it might be the Undead Scarb."

She closed the door gently behind her.

As soon as she was gone, Gregor shouted, "Have you gone completely out of your mind-Skags, Undead Scarbs—"

"She's beautiful," Arnold said dreamily.

"Are you listening to me? How are we supposed to decontaminate a haunted planet?"

"Coelle isn't haunted."

"What makes you think not?"

"Because the original Skag Burrow, according to the very best evidence, was on the planet Duerité, *not* on Coelle. A Skag ghost would know that. Ergo, what she saw was no ghost."

Gregor frowned thoughtfully.

"Hmm. You think someone wants to frighten her off Coelle?"

"Obviously," Arnold said.

"But the planet's been deserted for years. Why would someone take an interest in it now?"

"I'm going to find out."

"Sounds like a job for a detective," Gregor told him.

"Perhaps you've forgotten," Arnold said. "I am an honor graduate of the Hepburn School of Scientific Detection."

"That was only a six weeks' correspondence course."

"So what? Detection is simply the rational application of logic. Moreover, detection and decontamination are essentially the same thing. Decontamination just carries the process of detection to its logical conclusion."

"I hope you know what you're talking about," Gregor said. "What about this gray and purple creature that's been following Myra around?"

"No such thing. A case of overwrought nerves," Arnold diagnosed. "The poor girl needs someone to protect her. Me, for example."

"Yeah. But who's going to protect you?"

Arnold didn't bother answering,

and the partners began to make their preparations.

II

THEY SPENT the rest of the day loading the *Hemstet* with various devices they had managed to keep out of hock. Gregor invested in a second-hand Steng needler. It seemed a good weapon against the more palpable forms of wizardry. After a quick dinner at the Milky Way Diner, they started back to their office.

After they had walked several blocks, Arnold said, "I think we're being followed."

"You have overwrought nerves," Gregor diagnosed.

"He was in the diner, too," Arnold said. "And I'm sure I saw him at the spaceport."

Gregor glanced over his shoulder: Half a block behind he saw a man sauntering along and glancing idly into store windows, his attitude studiously casual.

The partners turned down a street. The man followed. They circled and returned to the avenue they had been on. The man was still there, keeping half a block between them.

"Have you noticed what he's wearing?" Arnold asked, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

Gregor looked again and saw that the man had on a gray suit and a purple tie—Skag Colors.

"Hmm," Gregor said. "Do you suppose an Undead Scarb—if there were such a thing—could take on human form?"

"I'd hate to find out," Arnold said. "You'd better get that needler ready."

"I left it on the ship."

"That's just fine," Arnold said bitterly. "Just perfect. Someone—or some *thing* is following us, probably with murderous intent, and you leave your blaster on the ship."

"Steady," Gregor said. "Maybe we can shake him."

They continued walking. Gregor looked back and saw that the man—or Scarb—was still there. He was walking more rapidly, closing the gap between them.

But coming down the street now was a taxi, its flag up.

They hailed it and climbed in. The man—or Scarb—looked around frantically for another cab, but there was none in sight. When they drove off he was standing on the curb, his purple tie slightly askew, glaring at them.

Myra Ryan was waiting for them at the office. She nodded when they told her about the follower.

"I warned you it might be dangerous," she said. "You can still back out, you know."

"What'll you do then?" Arnold asked.

"I'll go back to Coelle," Myra said. "No Skags are going to keep me off my planet."

"We're going," Arnold said, gazing tenderly at her. "You know we wouldn't desert you, Myra."

"Of course not," Gregor said wearily.

At that moment the door opened, and in walked a man wearing a gray suit and purple tie.

"The Scarb!" Arnold gasped, and reached for his paperweight.

"That's no Scarb," Myra said calmly. "That's Ross Jameson. Hello, Ross."

Jameson was a tall, beautifully groomed man in his early thirties, with a handsome, impatient face and hard eyes.

"Myra," he said, "have you gone completely insane?"

"I don't think so, Ross," Myra said sweetly.

"Are you really going to Coelle with these charlatans?"

Gregor stepped forward. "Were you following us?"

"You're damned right I was," Jameson said belligerently.

"I don't know who you are," Gregor said, "but—"

"I'm Miss Ryan's fiancé," Jameson said, "and I'm not going to let her go through with this ridiculous project. Myra, from what you've told me, this planet of yours sounds dangerous. Why don't you forget about it and marry me?"

"I want to live on Coelle," Myra said, in a dangerously quiet voice. "I want to live on my own little planet."

Jameson shook his head. "We've been through this a thousand times. Darling, you can't seriously expect me to give up my business and move to this little mudball with you. I've got my work—"

"And I've got my mudball," Myra said. "It's my very own mudball, and I want to live there."

"With the Skags?"

"I thought you didn't believe in that sort of thing," Myra said.

"I don't. But some trickery is going on, and I don't like to see you involved. It's probably that crazy hermit. There's no telling what he'll try next. Myra, won't you *please*—"

"No!" Myra said. "I'm going to Coelle!"

"Then I'm going with you."

"You are not," Myra said coldly.

"I've already arranged it with my staff," Jameson said. "You'll need someone to protect you on that ridiculous planet, and you can't expect much from these two." He glared contemptuously at Gregor and Arnold.

"Maybe you didn't understand me," Myra said, in a very quiet voice. "You are not coming, Ross."

Jameson's firm face sagged, and his eyes grew worried. "Myra," he said, "please let me come. If anything happened to you I'd—I don't know what I'd do. Please, Myra?"

There was no doubting the sincerity in his voice. When Jameson dropped his commanding voice and lowered the imposing thrust of his shoulders, he became a very

appealing young man, quite obviously in love.

Myra said softly, "All right, Ross. And—thanks."

Gregor cleared his throat loudly. "We blast off in two hours."

"Fine," Jameson said, taking Myra's arm. "We have time for a drink, dear."

Arnold said, "Pardon me, Mr. Jameson. How does it happen you are wearing gray and purple—the Skag Colors?"

"Are they?" Jameson asked. "Pure coincidence. I've owned this tie for years."

"And who is the hermit?"

"I thought you geniuses knew everything," Jameson said, with a nasty grin. "See you at the ship."

After they had gone, a deep, gloomy silence hung over the office. Finally Arnold said, "So she's engaged."

"So it would seem," Gregor said. "But not married," he added sympathetically.

"No, she's not married," Arnold said, becoming cheerful again. "And Jameson is obviously the wrong man for her. I'm sure Myra wouldn't marry a liar."

"Of course she wouldn't marry a— Huh?"

"Didn't you notice? That purple tie he's 'owned for years' was brand new. I think we'll keep an eye on Mr. Jameson."

Gregor gazed at his partner with admiration. "That's a very clever observation."

"The process of detection," Arnold said sententiously, "is merely the accumulation of minute discrepancies and infinitesimal inconsistencies, which are immediately apparent to the trained eye."

Gregor and the trained eye put the office into order. At eleven o'clock they met Jameson and Myra at the ship, and, without further incident, departed for Coelle.

III

Ross Jameson was president and chief engineer of Jameson Electronics, a small but growing concern he had inherited from his father. It was a great responsibility for so young a man, and Ross had adopted a brusque, overbearing manner to avoid any hint of indecisiveness. But whenever he was able to forget his exalted position he was a pleasant enough fellow, and a good sport in facing the many little discomforts of interstellar travel.

Myra's *Hemstet 4* was old and hogged out of shape by repeated high-gravity takeoffs. The ship had developed a disconcerting habit of springing leaks in the most inaccessible places, which Arnold and Gregor had to locate and patch. Her astrogation system wasn't to be trusted, either, and Jameson spent considerable time figuring out a way of controlling the automatics manually.

When Coelle's little sun was finally in sight and the ship in its

deceleration orbit, the four of them were able, for the first time, to share a meal together.

"What's the story on this hermit?" Gregor asked over coffee.

"You must have heard of him," Jameson said. "He calls himself Edward the Hermit, and he's written a book."

"The book is *Dreams on Kerma,*" Myra filled in. "It was a best seller last year."

"Oh, *that* hermit," Gregor said, and Arnold nodded.

They had read the hermit's book, along with several thousand others, while sitting in their office waiting for business. *Dreams on Kerma* had been a sort of spatial Robinson Crusoe. Edward's struggles with his environment, and with himself, had made exciting reading. Because of his lack of scientific knowledge, the hermit had made many blunders. But he had persevered, and created a home for himself out of the virgin wilderness of the planet Kerma.

The young misanthrope's calm decision to give up forever the society of mankind and devote his life to the contemplation of nature and the universe—the Eternals, as he called them—had struck some responsive chord in millions of harried men and women. A few had been sufficiently inspired to seek out their own hermitages. Almost without exception they returned to Terra in six months or a year, sadder but wiser men. Solitude, they discovered, made better reading than living.

"But what has he got to do with Coelle?" Arnold asked.

"Coelle is the second planet of the Gelsors system," Jameson said. "Kerma is the third planet, and the hermit is its only inhabitant."

Gregor said, "I still don't see—"

"I guess it was my fault," Myra said. "You see, the hermit's book inspired me. It was what decided me to live on Coelle, even if I had to do it alone." She threw Jameson a cutting glance. "Do you remember his chapter on the joy of possessing an entire planet? I can't describe what that did to me. I felt—"

"I still don't see the connection," Gregor said.

"I'm coming around to it," Myra said, looking extremely embarrassed. "When I found out that Edward the Hermit and I were neighbors, astronomically speaking, I decided to speak to him. I had no intention of intruding on his privacy. I just wanted to tell him how much his book meant to me. So I radioed him from Coelle."

"He has a radio?" Arnold asked.

"Of course," Myra said. "He explained that in his first chapter. He keeps it so he can listen to the absurd voices of mankind, and laugh himself to sleep."

"Oh. Go on."

"Well, when he heard I was

going to live on Coelle, he became furious. Said he couldn't stand having a human so close."

"That's ridiculous," Arnold said. "The planets are millions of miles apart."

"I told him that. But he started shouting and screaming at me. He said mankind wouldn't leave him alone. Real estate brokers were trying to talk him into selling his mineral rights, and a travel agency was going to route its ships within ten thousand miles of the upper atmosphere of his planet. And then to top it all, I come along and move in practically on his doorstep."

"And then he threatened her," Jameson said.

"I guess it was a threat," Myra said. "He told me to get out of the Gelsors system, or he wouldn't be responsible for what happened."

"Did he say *what* would happen?" Arnold asked.

"No. He just hinted it would be pretty extreme."

Jameson said, "I think it's apparent that the man's unbalanced. After the talk, these so-called Skag incidents began. There must be a connection."

"It's possible," Arnold said judiciously.

"I just can't believe it," Myra said, gazing pensively out a port. "His book was so beautiful. And his picture on the book jacket—he looked so soulful."

"Hah!" Jameson said. "Anyone who'd live alone on an empty planet *must* be off his rocker."

Myra gave him a venomous look. And then the radar alarm went off. They were about to land on Coelle . . .

The Skag Castle dominated Coelle. Built of an almost indestructible gray stone, the castle sprawled across the curved land like a prehistoric monster crouched over Lilliputia. Its towers and battlements soared past the narrow limits of the planet's atmosphere, and the utmost spires were lost in haze. As they approached, the black slitted windows seemed to stare menacingly at them.

"Cozy little place," Gregor commented.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Myra said. "Come on, I'll show you around."

The three men looked at the castle, then at each other.

"Just the ground floor," Arnold begged.

Myra wanted to show them *everything*. It wasn't every girl who became the owner of an alien birthplace, period house and haunted castle, all rolled into one. But she settled for a few of the main attractions—the library, containing ten thousand Skag scrolls which no one could read, the Worship Chamber of Ieele, and the Grand Torture Room.

Dinner was prepared by the auto-cook Uncle Jim had thoughtfully installed, and later they had brandy on the terrace, under the

stars. Myra gave them all bedrooms on the second floor, to avoid as much climbing as possible. They retired, planning on beginning the investigation early in the morning.

The partners shared a bedroom the size of a small soccer field, with bronze death masks of Scarb princes leering from the wall. Arnold kicked off his shoes, flopped into bed, and was asleep immediately.

Gregor paced around for a few minutes, smoked a last cigarette, snapped off the light and climbed into his bed. He was on the verge of sleep, when suddenly he sat upright. He thought he had heard a dull rumbling noise, like the sound of a giant walking underneath the castle. Nerves, he told himself.

Then the rumbling came again, the floor shook, and the death masks clattered angrily against the wall.

In another moment the noise had subsided.

"Did you hear it?" Gregor whispered.

"Of course I heard it," Arnold said crossly. "It almost shook me out of bed."

"What do you think?"

"It could be a form of poltergeism," Arnold answered, "although I doubt it. We'll explore the cellar tomorrow."

"I don't think this place has any cellar," Gregor said.

"It hasn't? Good! That would clinch it."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I'll have to accumulate a bit more data before I can make a positive statement," Arnold said smugly.

"Have you any idea what you're talking about? Or are you just making it up as you go along. Because if—"

"Look!"

Gregor turned, and saw a gray and purple light in one corner of the room. It pulsed weirdly, throwing fantastic shadows across the bronze death masks. Slowly it approached them. As it drew nearer they could make out the reptilian outlines of a Skag, and through him they could see the walls of the room.

Gregor fumbled under his pillow, found the needler and fired. The charge went *through* the Skag, and pocked a neat three-inch groove in the stone wall.

The Skag stood before them, its cloak swirling, an expression of extreme disapproval on its face. And then, without a sound, it was gone.

As soon as he could move, Gregor snapped on the light. Arnold was smiling faintly, staring at the place where the Skag had been.

"Very interesting," Arnold said. "Very interesting indeed."

"What is?"

"Do you remember how Myra described the Undead Scarb?"

"Sure. She said it was nine feet

tall, had little wings, and—oh. I think I see."

"Precisely," Arnold said. "This Skag or Scarb was no more than four feet in height, without wings."

"I suppose there could be two types," Gregor said dubiously. "But what bearing does this have on the underground noises? The whole thing is getting ridiculously complicated. Surely you must realize that."

"Complication is frequently a key to solution," Arnold said. "Simplicity alone is baffling. Complexity, on the other hand, implies the presence of a self-contradictory logic structure. Once the incomprehensibles are reconciled and the extraneous factors are cancelled, the murderer stands revealed in the glaring light of rational inevitability."

"What are you talking about?" Gregor shouted. "There wasn't any murder here!"

"I was quoting from lesson three in the Hepburn School for Scientific Detection Correspondence Course. And I know there was no murder. I was just speaking in general."

"But what do you think is going on?" Gregor asked.

"Something funny is going on," Arnold said. He smiled knowingly, turned over and went to sleep.

Gregor snapped out the light. Arnold's course, he remembered, had cost ten dollars plus a coupon from *Horror Crime Magazine*. His partner had certainly received his money's worth.

There were no further incidents that night.

IV

BRIGHT AND early in the morning, the partners were awakened by Myra pounding on their door.

"A spaceship is landing!" she called.

Hurriedly they dressed and came down, meeting Jameson on the stairs. Outside, they saw that a small spacer had just put down, and its occupant was climbing out.

"More trouble," Jameson growled.

The new arrival hardly looked like trouble. He was middle-aged, short and partially bald. He was dressed in a severely conservative business suit, and he carried a briefcase. His features were quiet and reserved.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "I am Frank Olson, a representative of Transstellar Mining. My card."

The four of them looked at his card and returned it. Olson continued.

"Transstellar Mining is contemplating an expansion into this territory, to take advantage of the new Terra-to Propexis space lane. I am doing the initial survey. We need planets upon which we can obtain mineral rights."

Myra shook her head. "Not interested. But why don't you try

Kerma?" she asked, with a sly smile.

"I just came from Kerma," Olson said. "I had what I considered a very attractive proposition for this Edward the Hermit fellow."

"I'll bet he booted you out on your ear," Gregor said.

"No. As a matter of fact, he wasn't there."

"Wasn't there?" Myra gasped. "Are you sure?"

"Reasonably so," Olson said. "His camp was deserted."

"Perhaps he went on a hike," Arnold said. "After all, he has an entire planet to wander over."

"I hardly think so. His big ship was gone, and a spaceship is hardly a suitable vehicle for wandering around a planet."

"Very clever deduction," Arnold said enviously.

"Not that it matters," Olson said. "I thought I'd ask him, just for the record." He turned to Myra. "You are the owner of this planet?"

"I am."

"Perhaps you would be interested in hearing our terms?"

"No!" Myra said.

"Wait," Jameson said. "You should at least hear him."

"I'm not interested," Myra said. "I'm not going to have anyone digging up *my* little planet."

"I don't even know if your planet has anything worth digging for," Olson said. "My company is simply trying to find out which planets are available."

"They'll never get this one," Myra said.

"Well, it isn't too important," Olson said. "There are many planets. Too many," he added, with a sigh. "I won't disturb you people any longer. Thank you for your time."

He turned, his shoulders slumping, and trudged back to his ship.

"Won't you stay to dinner?" Myra called impulsively. "You must get pretty tired of eating canned food in that spaceship."

"I do," Olson said, with a rueful smile. "But I really can't stay. I hate to make a blastoff after dark."

"Then stay until morning," Myra said. "We'd be glad to put you up."

"I wouldn't want to be any trouble—"

"I've got about two hundred rooms in there," Myra said, pointing at the Skag Castle. "I'm sure we can squeeze you in somewhere."

"You're very kind," Olson said. "I—I believe I will!"

"Hope you aren't nervous about Undead Scarbs," Jameson said.

"What?"

"This planet seems to be haunted," Arnold told him. "By the ghost or ghosts of an extinct reptilian race."

"Oh, come now," Olson said. "You're pulling my leg. Aren't you?"

"Not at all," Gregor said.

Olson grinned to show that no

one was taking *him* in. "I believe I'll tidy up," he said.

"Dinner's at six," Myra said.

"I'll be there. And thank you again." He returned to his ship.

"Now what?" Jameson asked.

"Now we are going to do some searching," Arnold said. He turned to Gregor. "Bring the portable detector. And we'll need a few shovels."

"What are we looking for?" Jameson asked.

"You'll see when we find it," Arnold said. He smiled insidiously and added, "I thought *you* knew everything."

Coelle was a very small planet, and in five hours Arnold found what he was looking for. In a little valley there was a long mound. Near it, the detector buzzed gaily.

"We will dig here," Arnold said.

"I bet I know what it is," Myra told them. "It's a burial mound, isn't it? And when you've uncovered it, we'll find row upon row of Undead Scarbs, their hands crossed upon their chests, waiting for the full moon. And we'll put stakes through their hearts, won't we?"

Gregor's shovel clanged against something metallic.

"Is that the tomb?" Myra asked.

But when they had thrown aside more dirt, they saw that it was not a tomb. It was the top of a spaceship.

"What's *that* doing here?" Jameson asked.

"Isn't it apparent?" Arnold said. "The hermit is not on his own planet. We know his feelings about Coelle. Naturally he would be here."

"And naturally he wouldn't leave his spaceship in plain sight!" Gregor said.

"So he's here," Jameson said slowly. "But where? Where on the planet?"

"Almost undoubtedly he's somewhere in the Skag Castle," Arnold said.

Jameson turned in triumph to Myra. "You see? I told you it was that crazy hermit! Now we have to catch him."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Arnold said.

"Why not?"

"At the proper time, Edward the Hermit will appear," Arnold said coolly. And they couldn't get another word out of him.

That evening the auto-cook surpassed itself. Frank Olson was a little stiff at first; but he unbent over the brandy, and regaled them with stories of the planets he had touched upon in his search for mining properties. Jameson wanted to search the castle and drag the hermit out of his hiding place. Sullenly, he yielded when Arnold pointed out the impossibility of four people covering several hundred rooms and passageways.

Later, they played bridge. Arnold's mind was elsewhere, how-

ever, and after trumping his partner's perfectly good trick a second time, they all decided to call it a night.

V

AN HOUR later, Mike Arnold whispered across the bedroom, "Are you asleep?"

"No," Gregor whispered back.

"Get dressed, then, but leave your shoes off."

"What's up?"

"I think we are going to solve the mystery of Skag Castle tonight. Mind if I borrow your needler?"

Gregor gave it to him. They tiptoed out of the bedroom, and down the great central staircase. They found a vantage point behind an enameled suit of Skag armor, where they could watch without being seen. For half an hour there was silence.

Then they saw a shape at the top of the landing. Soundlessly it crept down the staircase and glided across the hall.

"Who is it?" Gregor whispered.

"Shh!" Arnold whispered back.

They followed the shape into the library. There it hesitated, as though uncertain what to do next.

At that moment the underground rumblings began, shattering the silence. The man jerked abruptly, startled. A light appeared in his hand. By its feeble glow, the partners recognized Frank Olson.

With his tiny flashlight, Olson searched one library wall. Finally he pressed a panel. It slid back, revealing a small switchboard. Olson turned two dials. The underground noises stopped at once.

Wiping his forehead, Olson listened for several moments. Then he snapped off his light, and noiselessly crept back to the hall, up the stairs, and into his bedroom, his utter quietness seeming almost uncanny.

Arnold pulled Gregor back behind the enameled armor.

"That ties it," Gregor said. "There's our Undead Scarb."

Arnold shook his head.

"Of course he is," Gregor said. "He must have planned this in order to frighten Myra off the planet. Then he could buy the mineral rights for next to nothing."

"Seems reasonable, doesn't it?" Arnold said. "But you've got a lot to learn about detection. In cases of this sort, what's reasonable is never right. The apparent solution is always wrong. Invariably!"

"Why look for complications that aren't there?" Gregor asked. "We *saw* Olson go to that hidden switchboard. We *heard* the noises stop as soon as he touched the controls. Or was that pure coincidence?"

"No, there's a casual relationship."

"Hmm. Maybe Olson isn't a mining representative at all. Do you think someone hired him? Edward the Hermit, maybe. As a mat-

ter of fact, perhaps he *is* Edward the Hermit!"

"Shh," Arnold whispered. "Look!"

Gregor's eyes had become accustomed to the dark. This time he recognized the man at once. It was Jameson, tiptoeing down the stairs.

Jameson walked to one side of the hall and turned on a small flashlight. By its light he found a panel in the wall, and pressed it. The panel slid back, revealing a small switchboard. Jameson breathed heavily and reached for the dials. Before he could touch them he heard a noise, and stepped quickly back.

A figure stepped out of the darkness. It was about six feet in height, and its face was hideous and reptilian. A long, spiked tail dragged behind it, and its fingers were webbed.

"I am the Undead Scarb!" it said to Jameson.

"Awk!" Jameson said, backing away.

"You must leave this planet," the Scarb said. "You must leave at once—or your life is forfeit!"

"Sure," Jameson said hastily, "sure I will. Just stay away. We'll leave, Myra and I—"

"Not Miss Ryan. The Earthwoman has shown a reverent understanding for the Old Lore, and for the spirit of Skag. But you, Ross Jameson, have profaned the Sacred Burrow."

The Scarb moved closer, its webbed fingers splayed. Jameson backed into a wall, and suddenly pulled a blaster.

At that moment, Arnold snapped on the lights. He shouted, "Don't shoot, Ross. You'd be arrested for murder." He turned to Gregor. "Now let's get a close look at this Scarb."

The Undead Scarb put one hand on top of his scaled head and pulled. The terrible head peeled off, revealing beneath it the youthful features of Edward the Hermit.

In a short time everyone was assembled in the great hall. Olson looked sleepy and disgruntled. He was fully dressed, as was Jameson. Myra was wearing a plaid wool bathrobe, and she was staring with interest at Edward the Hermit.

Edward looked younger than the picture on the jacket of his book. He had peeled off the rest of his Scarb disguise, and was wearing patched jeans and a gray sweatshirt. He was deeply tanned, his blond hair was cropped short, and he would have been good-looking except for the expression of fear and apprehension on his face.

After Arnold summed up the events of the night, Myra was completely bewildered.

"It just doesn't make sense," she said. "Mr. Olson was turning Skag noises on and off, Ross had a switchboard, and Edward the Hermit was disguised as a Scarb. What's the explanation? Were

they *all* trying to drive me from Coelle?"

"No," Arnold said. "Mr. Olson's part in this was purely accidental. Those underground noises weren't designed to frighten you. Were they, Mr. Olson?"

Olson smiled ruefully. "They certainly were not. As a matter of fact, I came here to stop them."

"I don't understand," Myra said.

"I'm afraid," Arnold said, "that Mr. Olson's company has been engaged in a bit of illegal mining." He smiled modestly. "Of course I recognized the characteristic sound of a Gens-Wilhem automatic ore-blaster at once."

"I *told* them to install mufflers," Olson said. "Well, the full explanation is this. Coelle was surveyed seventeen years ago, and an excellent deposit of sligastrium was found. Trans-stellar Mining offered the then owner, James McKinney, a very good price for mineral rights. He refused, but after a short stay left Coelle for good. A company official decided to extract a little ore anyhow, since this planet was so far out, and there were no local observers. You'd be surprised how common a practice that is."

"I think it's despicable," Myra said.

"Don't blame me," Olson said. "I didn't set up the operation."

"Then those underground noises—" Gregor said.

"Were merely the sounds of mining apparatus," Olson told them. "You caught us by surprise, Miss Ryan. We never really expected the planet to be inhabited again. I was sent, post haste, to turn off the machines. Just half an hour ago I had my first opportunity."

"What if I hadn't asked you to stay overnight?" Myra asked.

"I would have faked a blown gasket or something." He sighed and sat down. "It was a pretty good operation while it lasted."

"That takes care of the noises," Jameson said. "The rest we know. This hermit came here, hid his spaceship, and disguised himself as a Scarb. He had already threatened Myra. Now he was going to frighten her into leaving Coelle."

"That's not true!" Edward shouted. "I—I was—"

"Was what?" Gregor asked.

The hermit clamped his mouth shut and turned away.

Arnold said, "*You* found that secret panel, Ross."

"Of course I did. You're not the only one who can detect. I knew there were no such things as Undead Scarbs and Skag ghosts. From what Myra told me, the whole thing sounded like an illusion to me, probably a modulated wave-pattern effect. So I looked around for a control board. I found it this afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Gregor asked.

"Because I consider you a pair of incompetents," Ross said con-

temptuously. "I came down this evening to catch the culprit in the act. And I did, too. I believe there are prison sentences for this sort of thing."

Everyone looked at Edward. The hermit's face had gone pale under its tan, but still he didn't speak.

Arnold walked to the control board and looked at the dials and switches. He pushed a button, and the great nine-foot figure of the Scarb appeared. Myra recognized it, and gave a little gasp. Even now, it was frightening. Arnold turned it off and faced Jameson.

"You were pretty careless," Arnold said quietly. "You really shouldn't have used company equipment for this. Every item here is stamped Jameson Electronics."

"That doesn't prove a thing," Jameson said. "Anyone can buy that equipment."

"Yes. But not everyone can use it." He turned to the hermit, "Edward, are you an engineer, by any chance."

"Of course not," Edward said sullenly.

"We have no proof of that," Jameson said. "Just because he says he isn't—"

"We have proof," Gregor burst in. "The hermit's book! When his electric blanket broke down, he didn't know how to fix it. And remember chapter six? It took him over a week to find out how to change a fuse in his auto-cook!"

Arnold said relentlessly, "The equipment's got your company's name on it, Ross. And I'll bet we find you've been absent from your office for considerable periods. The local spaceport will have any record of you taking out an interstellar ship. Or did you manage to hide all that?"

By Ross' face they could tell he hadn't. Myra said, "Oh, Ross."

"I did it for you, Myra," Jameson said. "I love you, but I couldn't live out here! I've got a company to think about, people depend on me . . ."

"So you tried to scare me off Coelle," Myra said.

"Doesn't that show how much I care for you?"

"That kind of caring I can live without," Myra said.

"But Myra—"

"And that brings us to Edward the Hermit," Arnold said.

The hermit looked up quickly. "Let's just forget about me," he said. "I admit I was trying to scare Miss Ryan off her planet. It was stupid of me. I'll never bother her again in any way. Of course," he said, looking at Myra, "if you want to press charges—"

"Oh, no."

"I apologize again. I'll be going." The hermit stood up and started to the door.

"Wait a minute," Arnold said. The expression on his face was painful. He hesitated, sighed fatalistically and said, "Are you going to tell her, or shall I?"

"I don't know what you're talk-

ing about," Edward said. "I must leave now—"

"Not yet. Myra's entitled to the whole truth," Arnold said. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Myra stared at the hermit. Edward's shoulders drooped hopelessly.

"What is all this?" she asked.

Edward looked angrily at Arnold. "I suppose you won't be satisfied until I've made an utter fool of myself. All right, here goes." He faced Myra. "When you radioed me and said you were going to live on Coelle, I was horrified. Everything started to go to pieces for me."

"But I was millions of miles away," Myra said.

"Yes. That was the trouble. You were so near—astronomically—and yet so far. You see, I was deathly sick of the whole hermit thing. I could stand it as long as no one was around, but once you came—"

"If you were tired of being a hermit," Myra said, "why didn't you leave?"

"My agent told me it would be literary suicide," the hermit said, with a sickly attempt at a cynical grin. "You see, I'm a writer. This whole thing was a publicity stunt. I was to hermit a planet and write a book. Which I did. The book was a best-seller. My agent talked me into doing a second book. I couldn't leave until it was done. That would have ruined everything. But I was starving for a human face. And then you came."

"And you threatened me," Myra said.

"Not really. I said I wouldn't be responsible for the consequences. I was really referring to my sanity. For days after that I thought about you. Suddenly, I realized I had to see you. Absolutely had to! So I came here, hid the ship—"

"And walked around dressed as a Scarb," Jameson sneered.

"Not at first," Edward said. "After I saw you, I guess . . . Well, I guess I fell in love with you. I knew then, if you stayed on Coelle —practically next door, astronomically—I could find the strength to stay on Kerma and finish my book. But I saw this Jameson fellow was trying to scare you off. So I decided to scare *him* off."

"Well," Myra said. "I'm glad we finally have met. I enjoyed your book so much."

"Did you?" Edward said, his face brightening.

"Yes. It inspired me to live on Coelle. But I'm sorry to hear it was all a fraud."

"It wasn't!" Edward cried. "The hermit thing was my agent's idea, but the book was perfectly genuine, and I did have all those experiences, and I *did* feel all those things. I like being away from civilization, and I especially like having my own planet. The only thing wrong . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, Kerma would be perfect if only I had one other person with

me. Someone who understands, who feels as I do."

"I know just how you feel," Myra said.

They looked at each other. When Jameson saw that look, he moaned and put his head in his hands.

"Come on, friend," Olson said, dropping a sympathetic hand on Jameson's shoulder. "You're trumped. I'll give you a lift back to Earth."

Ross nodded vaguely, and started to the door with Olson. Olson said, "Say, I imagine you folks will be only needing one planet before long, huh?"

Myra blushed crimson. Edward looked embarrassed, then said in a firm voice, "Myra and I are going to get married. That is, if you'll have me, Myra. Will you marry me, Myra?"

She said yes in a very small voice.

"That's what I thought," Olson said. "So you won't be needing two planets. Would one of you care to lease your mineral rights? It'd be a nice little income, you know. Help to set up housekeeping."

Ross Jameson groaned and hurried out the door.

"Well," Edward said to Myra, "it isn't a bad idea. We'll be living on Kerma, so you might as well—"

"Just a minute," Myra said. "We are going to live on Coelle and no other place."

"No!" Edward said. "After all the work I've put into Kerma, I will not abandon it."

"Coelle has a better climate."

"Kerma has a lighter gravity."

Olson said, "When you get it figured out, you'll give Trans-stellar Mining first chance, won't you? For old time's sake?"

They both nodded. Olson shook hands with them and left.

Arnold said, "I believe that solves the mysteries of the Skag Castle. We'll be going now, Myra. We'll return your ship on drone circuit."

"I don't know how to thank you," Myra said.

"Perhaps you'll come to our wedding," Edward said.

"We'd be delighted."

"It'll be on Coelle, of course," Myra said.

"Kerma!"

When the partners left, the young couple were glaring angrily at each other.

VI

WHEN THEY were at last in space, Terra bound, Gregor said, "That was a very handsome job of detection."

"It was nothing," Arnold said modestly. "You would have figured it out yourself in a few months."

"Thanks. And it was very nice of you, speaking up for Edward the way you did."

"Well, Myra was a bit strong-minded for me," Arnold said.

"And a trifle provincial. I am, after all, a creature of the great cities."

"It was still an extremely decent thing to do."

Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "The trouble is, how will Myra and Edward solve this planet problem? Neither seems the type to give in."

"Oh, that's as good as solved," Gregor said off-handedly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it's obvious," Gregor said. "And it fills the one gaping hole in your otherwise logical reconstruction of events."

"What hole? What is it?"

"Oh, come now," Gregor said, enjoying his opportunity to the utmost. "It's *obvious.*"

"I don't see it. Tell me."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out in a few months. Think I'll take a nap."

"Don't be that way," Arnold pleaded. "What is it?"

"All right. How tall was Jameson's electronic Scarb, the one that frightened Myra?"

"About nine feet."

"And how tall was Edward, disguised as a Scarb?"

"About six feet tall."

"And the Scarb we saw in our bedroom, the one we shot at—"

"Good lord!" Arnold gasped. "That Scarb was only four feet tall. *We have one Scarb left over!*"

"Exactly. One Scarb which no one produced artificially, and which we can't account for—except by the fact that Coelle actually *is* haunted."

"I see what you mean," Arnold said thoughtfully. "They'll have to move to Kerma. But we didn't really fulfill our contract."

"We did enough," Gregor said. "We decontaminated three distinct species of Skag—produced by Jameson, Olson and Edward. If they want a fourth species taken care of, that'll be a separate contract."

"You're right," Arnold said. "It's about time we became businesslike. And it's for their own good. Something has to make up their minds for them." He thought for a moment. "I suppose they'll leave Coelle to Trans-stellar Mining. Should we tell Olson that the planet is really haunted?"

"Certainly not," Gregor said. "He'd just laugh at us. Have you ever heard of ghosts frightening an automatic mining machine?"

memorium

by . . . Basil Wells

An old man's memories may be filled with bitterness. But faithfully recorded, they may change the future of mankind.

"TELL ME about Gramr, Granthr," the thin-faced little boy demanded. "You promised to tell me about my three Gramrs."

Vance Norall's attention snapped reluctantly back to his visitor. It was perhaps not surprising that he should have dropped off for a moment. At a hundred and thirty such a lapse was understandable . . . His eyes cleared.

"Ah, yes. Your great, great grandmothers, Ronnie. First of all there was Elsie. A lovely woman. Tall she was—taller than I, and dark. She rode well, swam well—even played championship golf. There was nothing she could not do."

Including lying, his mind wanted to add. After her death, when in a fit of anger she had driven too fast and crashed into a nest of highway posts, her memorium tapes had been brought to him in the hospital where he was recuperating. And from the tapes he learned what he had never really suspected —that her affections were as unstable and as unpredictable as her golf game was accurate.

She had loved him. The tapes, at

Did you ever wonder what would happen if the thoughts of every man, woman and child on Earth were set down in black and white for future historians to read? Or even present-day historians—or your next door neighbor? Could you endure having all of your thoughts laid bare, from the cradle to the grave? Wait before you answer. Basil Wells may persuade you to change your mind.

five year intervals, had confirmed that. But in the fifteen years of their life together she had had many regrettable episodes to recall —times when anger or loneliness had driven her to seek other companions.

"We were happy, Ronnie. I was teaching in an upstate college and your Gramr Elsie was touring the world collecting trophies. I remember seeing her on television talking with kings, prime ministers and presidents . . ."

It had been a miserable, lonely life for Elsie. The tapes told the real truth of those years. Her gay letters home had been mainly untruths. Yet a hard core of ambition, of a hunger for adulation, had driven her on. His first hurt anger at what her memories had revealed had changed to sympathy and pity as he came to understand her better.

While the second boy, Arthur, was being born he had resigned from his instructor's position and gone into business. And Arthur's birth had left Elsie in poor health. Her globe-trotting days as an athlete and a golfer ended. And in rebellion she had struck back at him blindly and secretly—childishly.

The last wild ride that had taken her life, had almost cost him his own, and the will to suicide had colored all of her thinking in the last long period before that tragic event.

"Of course, Ronny, Gramr Elsie remained at home after your great granthr was born. And after she was killed in an automobile crash all her trophies were put into a case at the Country Club."

"And after that you married Gramr Vivian, and became very wealthy, and you built this living dome here in Antarctica near the mines." Ronnie smiled gravely. "That part I know very well."

Yes, that part Ronnie knew very well. But Ronnie had not known the austere efficient nurse, his second wife, who had cared for him after the accident. She had been a dutiful and thoughtful wife—a perfect mother to Elsie's two sons and their own three daughters—but always there had been a feeling of reserve between them. Even in their most intimate moments she had seemed self-sufficient and respectful . . .

Only after her death in her sleep, when he was sixty and Vivian was fifty, had he learned that she had a rheumatic heart, and should have slackened her headlong pace years before. And from her memory tapes, sent to him by the memorium proctors six months after the burial, he learned how distorted and cramped had been her philosophy of life.

She had hated and disliked all men—a silly, slightly sordid romance in her girlhood was her mental excuse for this attitude. Inwardly she shrank from any sign of affection, or any physical contact with him. Yet she desired

marriage for the social status and monetary independence it afforded. Bitterly she had paid the price . . .

"Gramr Vivian was an unusual woman," Norall told Ronnie, an ironical tone to his surprisingly strong old voice. "After she died I did not plan to remarry. I spent all my time in Antarctica building subterranean highways and developing mines . . ."

"Until Gramr Eldris Arovvack," Ronnie rolled the *Arovvack* on his tongue, "came down to visit her son in one of your camps."

"I think you know all this better than I do, Ronnie," Norall said, laughing. "Maybe I should tell the proctors to destroy my memory tapes after I am gone. You will not need them."

"Oh, no, Granthr! It is against the law. Only after a hundred years without a withdrawal from the files can a memorium tape be destroyed. I wish to keep in touch with you—it will be like talking with you again."

"I see the proctors are doing a good job of indoctrination in the schools, Ronnie." Norall sighed. "When I was your age, back in nineteen-fifty, the universal recordings of all citizens' memories was not even imagined.

"That came in the seventies. The Communists developed the system of brain stripping and recordings to weed out subversives and disloyal party members. They adapted it from our own process of clearing a disordered brain, in our mental institutions, and giving the individual a fresh start with a blank memory.

"By the Twenty-first Century all the major nations were keeping mental checks on their citizens, and eventually even the party leaders, much to their horror, were checked and removed from office."

"I know all that, Granthr," Ronnie cried impatiently. "We have it in school on ever so many *edutapes*. They say that the memorium is the greatest deterrent to crime and vicious thinking.

"But I want to hear about the olden times—when there were wars and singing commercials and big ugly cities."

"It was not so wonderful, Ronnie. Today is much nicer, and safer. When I was a boy we worshipped cowboys and pirates. Today it is the G.I. and the city gangster."

"Tell me about how you and Gramr Eldris Arovvack were caught in the vehicular subway for three days after that earthquake, Granthr."

"You know that by heart, Ronnie," Norall protested, "but if you insist . . ."

Eldris Arovvack was in his mind's eye even as his voice went on speaking. Eldris, so slight, so daintily feminine and so girlishly blonde and beautiful despite her forty years and her grown engineering son. They had been trapped together for three days in a subway shuttle and he had fallen in love

despite the twenty-five years between their ages.

For her, he had realized, this was a marriage of companionship and luxury. She had always known poverty. His two previous marriages had given him an insight into why women marry, but so deep was his love for Eldris that he wanted to be with her under any conditions.

And they had been happy. Despite the continual gnawing realization that only his money and position had drawn them together, Norall had enjoyed a long sixty-three years of life with Eldris.

She had died but two years before . . .

"Granthr, I think I liked Gramr Eldris better than either of my other gramrs," Ronnie was saying. "Of course she's the only gramr I knew."

Norall squeezed the little boy's shoulder, hard.

It had been harder to accept the memorium tapes of Eldris than it had been to see her body disappear into the crematorium. For days he had refused to open the small sealed packets and insert the tapes into the reproducer. He felt that he could not endure to contact that beloved mind and feel there hatred, distaste and hidden foulness that humans too well know.

And when, in his great loneliness, he finally did renew contact with the recorded memories of Eldris, he was astounded—and humiliated.

For Eldris, through all the years of their marriage, had loved him. Her first marriage had ended in hatred, yes, and in pity for a weakling, but for Norall there was only a deepening respect and sincere affection.

And he had returned that love with a never-ending mistrust and cynical suspicion of her motives!

But he was happy now. After Ronnie left he would be alone again with her memorium tapes. Together they would relive the long happy years of their marriage. He would share her sadness as she felt that Norall did not care enough and he would feel her joy as their grandchildren, and *their* children, came to visit and to be married in the old family dome.

He must have been napping for the fraction of a second . . .

"I must go now, Granthr. You are tired. Mother says I am not to tire you."

"Come again tomorrow. And Ronnie!" His bony arm reached out for the boy's gay blue tunic. "After I am gone and you are old enough to withdraw my tapes from the memorium library and contact them—"

He paused, his frail old fingers tightening on the fabric.

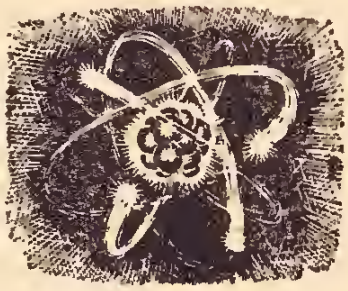
"Do not think too harshly of me and of your other granthrs and gramrs. When we were young we could not know that after death all our thoughts would be laid bare. Our parents and our nations did not know, and we were fed un-

truths that colored all our lives.

The little boy's thin face was puzzled.

"Run along," Norall said softly. "Some day you will understand."

He sent the wheelchair buzzing over toward the memorium tapes and the soft gray helmet for his head even as the door closed behind the boy.



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testing

by . . . Jacques Jean Ferrat

The patriarch had the strength and courage of a young man. But only the wisdom of the very old could prevent a terrible war.

A TERRESTRIAL journalist once described the plight of a space pilot on a solo interstellar trip as being similar to that of a flea on one of the great stone dogs of Planet VI, Betelgeuse. All that vast expanse to plunder and no way of getting at it.

To Echelon Leader Hannibal Pryor, the simile was apt. It was aggravated by the fact that he was an unwilling flea. If his chief and sponsor, Star Marshal Stefan Lopez, had not backed the losing side in the last Sirius IX plebescite, Pryor would have been piloting the immense star-battleship *Erebus,* from which the planet-buster was to be dropped. Instead, he had been assigned this miserable chore of checking Rigel IV, the planet scheduled for blasting.

It was a job that should have gone to a mere ensign, not a veteran echelon leader with three comets on his breast. There was nothing to do. His survey route had been plotted in advance by the calculators that crammed the deck below and precision instruments did all the checking. If

The ebullient author of NIGHTMARE TOWER *and* WHEN THE WHITE RAIN CAME *has done it again—achieved a near-miracle of reporting in the wondrous bright purlieus of tomorrow. We've often wondered whether Jacques Jean Ferrat actually travels into the future to observe its liveliest attributes or simply peers through one of those remarkable "peepholes in Time" which open up occasionally. Whatever his technique, the results are delightful.*

Rigel IV were habitable or inhabited, it would not have been selected for the test.

The flying laboratory in which he sat would circle it twice, then return under automatic control to the dot in space, 3,000,000 kilometers away, five o'clock vector, where ships of half the inhabited planets were gathering to watch the test.

Wellington Smith, the new chief star marshal, had his own pet pilot for the big job. Hannibal Pryor, as one of Lopez' top men, was out of the big picture.

Flying the preliminary milk run! It made acid flow in his veins. And he was getting fat from punching out weird gastronomic combinations on the food-board. There was nothing to do but eat —and swill up the non-intoxicating drinks available through the dispenser.

The way things stood, Pryor knew he'd be lucky if he made wing chief in ten years Earth-time. Once you were out of the big picture, it took a miracle to pull you back into focus.

Idly, Pryor lowered his long dark-skinned body into the observor's bucket, and watched the small golden dot that was Rigel IV swiftly enlarge itself on the screen. It took on a bluish tinge and acquired the fuzzy halo that denoted an atmosphere.

The scientists, prodded by the political leaders of Sirius Sector, had selected for the sake of thoroughness a planet known to be habitable, though uninhabited, at least by human beings. The planet buster had already been tested on the airless satellites of one of the dark stars.

Without much interest, Pryor watched Rigel IV fill the screen, gradually become convex. He had landed on far too many worlds to be frightened by the effect of its falling upon him as he neared it. Half-subconsciously, he noted that the star-brakes were working perfectly.

He felt the faint jar as the atmosphere engines took over from the star-drive. The little lights on the panel flared and flickered in proper sequence as the flying laboratory began its first circuit of a world that was soon to be blasted to stardust.

Later, he realized that he must have dozed off. At any rate, he missed the flicker of green light at the left of the panel and it took the rasping electronic voice that unexpectedly called, "Pilot control, pilot control, pilot control," to awaken him.

He muttered, *"Diamede!"* in sheer disbelief, as he pushed the button that turned off the voice and took over the controls. It couldn't possibly have happened and yet—the instruments were never wrong.

Rigel IV was inhabited—by humans!

As he brought the ship in along an ever-slowing parabola, Pryor

pulled the outspeaker over in front of his mouth and said, "Lab Able calling *Erebus,* Lab Able calling *Erebus.* Locator shows humanity on Rigel Four, locator shows humanity on Rigel Four. Over."

He held course and watched the seconds tick by on the call chronometer. Eleven, twelve, thirteen . . . thirty-five-thirty six . . . A burst of gibberish emerged from the inspeaker until he tuned the unscrambler and heard, "I hear you, Lab Able. Check for inhabitants and arrange immediate evacuation, check for inhabitants and arrange immediate evacuation. Report when assignment complete, report when assignment complete. Time is of the essence, time is of the essence. Over and out, over and out."

Pryor wrestled with temptation. If he put another message through, unscrambled, stating the situation, Interstellar Control monitors would inevitably pick it up. Interstellar Control was death on any interference with inhabited planets. Interstellar Control was already on record as being against the planet-buster test on a usable world. And not even the new chief star-marshal was strong enough to buck IC.

Pryor smiled and hummed a little Antarean tune as he slowed Lab Able to hovering speed. If he handled the situation adroitly, he should be able to get Marshal Lopez out of the doghouse—and, quite as important, one Echelon Leader Hannibal Pryor back in the big picture.

According to the instruments, the humans on Rigel IV lived in a single small settlement in the south temperate zone of the planet, surprisingly close to the forbidding antarctic ice-cap.

Pryor cut in distance-detail vision and blinked unbelievingly at a cluster of thatched roofs about a strangely familiar structure with a tall white pointed spire. The fields about the settlement, where they did not show cultivation, bore an odd pale purple hue. Beyond the village lay a long, narrow, twisting body of pale blue water.

Pryor spotted a level spot that looked suitable for landing, clear of the tilled fields. His mocha colored fingers played the panel-buttons like the fingers of an organist ringing in stops, as he prepared Lab Able for its descent.

Emerging from his ship, Pryor discovered that the pale purple fields were actually covered with a sort of low, tough shrubbery. It covered the sparsely-treed hills beyond the lake and seemed to fade into the deep misty blue of the afternoon sky.

Although he had never seen a landscape like it, in all his roving over scores of planets, Pryor found it pleasant. A strong, cool wind whipped his weatherproof coverall against the backs of his legs. After the artificial atmosphere of Lab Able, the fresh air stung his nostrils pleasantly. And the smell

of the pale purple shrubbery was sweet.

He scrambled over a low barrier of uncut gray stone that marked the boundary of the field in which he had landed and found himself on a narrow road of ochre-hued dirt. He trudged along it, toward the village, and around a dipping bend met two men riding in a surface car of fantastically ancient vintage. If Pryor had not seen similar vehicles in his histofilm course at the academy, he would scarcely have known what it was. It actually ran on wheels with plastic rims.

It pulled to a halt alongside him and the red-bearded patriarch sitting next to the young man at the controls, leapt spryly out and said in odd thick accents, "Welcome to Leith on Nevis, sir."

The older man had to repeat the greeting before Pryor found words. There was so much that was astonishing about him. First, his clothing. It consisted of stout shoes of what looked like real leather, long woven socks in brilliant diamond checks, a brief black jacket and a sort of skirt woven in a complex pattern of blue-and-green checks and kept from flaring in the wind by a heavy pouch of some sort of fur.

A sort of blanket that matched the skirt was slung over his left shoulder and an odd-looking flat black bonnet, turned up on one side by an elaborate metal clip, had a headband of the same bright material.

Second, his beard. For centuries, all male human children were given facial depilation shortly after birth, and as a result, the old man's luxurious red growth looked both alarming and unsanitary. Third, his skin. It was like that of the young man engaged in turning the vehicle awkwardly about, a pale reddish pink that made Pryor conscious of his own dark normality.

When he had recovered from his surprise at encountering such a strange specimen, Pryor returned his greeting and asked to be taken to the chief or leader of the community.

The younger man, who had pulled up alongside again but facing the other way, said, "You're speaking to the Dominie now, sir." His accent was as alien and thick as that of the man with the beard. And his costume was similar save for minor details.

On the way to the village, they had to halt while a flock of *baaaing* gray sheep, tended by a husky-looking youngster and a long-haired black-and-white dog, crossed the dirt road. Pryor, who had never seen anything like them before, asked what they were, what they were for.

The older man smiled and said, "Their wool supplies us with the clothing we wear. Their hides provide us with light leather. Their flesh provides us with meat for the table."

Pryor nodded, wishing he hadn't asked. The idea of eating the flesh of living creatures—or recently living creatures—appalled him. He had an idea he wasn't going to enjoy his dinner.

The village, with its stone houses and thatched roofs reminded Pryor of a village in a fairy tale vidarfilm. He noted with growing amazement that all the inhabitants seemed to be fair of hair and skin, all wore the gay skirts and bonnets, regardless of sex. He was asked to alight in front of the largest house, one close by the stone church with its white wooden spire.

The Dominie led him into a room of wholly unexpected comfort and applied flame to a pile of cut logs in a wide stone fireplace.

This done, he produced two earthenware mugs and a stone bottle and said, "I doubt not but that your mission to Leith on Nevis is important. It is only fitting we indulge in a drop before we come to such matters."

The Dominie drained his mug without changing expression, but the innocent looking amber liquid made Pryor gasp. It seemed to burn his gullet and, seconds later, start a warming fire in his veins. When he could talk, he gasped, "What was that, Dominie?"

"That," said the older man, smiling through his beard, "is uisquebaugh, the water of life, known to the less ancient as whiskey."

"I've heard of it," Pryor managed. He wondered if he weren't dreaming the whole business, and shook himself mentally in an effort to awaken in the prosaic surroundings of Lab Able. But nothing changed.

"I'm afraid," he said, "I've brought you a problem, Dominie." He wondered what the word meant. "I've got orders from headquarters, Sirius Sector to have this planet evacuated at once."

Courteously, the older man refilled Pryor's mug, then poured more liquid fire into his own. He said, "And what is the alternative?"

"There is no alternative," Pryor replied bluntly. "In a matter of thirty-six hours, Earth-time, this little world is going to be blown to smithereens."

"I'll say one thing for you, young man," said the Dominie. "You don't believe in beating about the bush." He drained his mug once more, and added over its rim, "Is the universe at war?"

"Not at present, I'm happy to say," said Pryor.

"Then I fear your errand is wasted," said the other. "If there is no war, then we shall not evacuate. Even if there were, I should hesitate to uproot my people. They would have to leave so much of what they have wrought and love behind them."

"I assure you," said Pryor, wondering just how stupid the patriarch

was, "that you will receive ample compensation."

"Can you then arrange ample compensation for human hearts?" the old man asked.

Pryor braced himself and drained his mug. To his surprise, the whiskey or whatever it was, went down smoothly. He said, "I'm afraid you don't understand the situation, sir. This planet, Rigel Four, is the subject for testing of the deadliest new bomb ever made. The experiment is already under way. You and your people must evacuate. Of course, if our plotters had known of your existence—"

"They'd have selected another world to blow up," the Dominie finished for him. "I fear they'll have to make the change anyway. Our title to this planet is quite clear and above-board. Allow me to show you."

He rose, crossed to a lovingly carved and polished cabinet, and withdrew not a vidiroll but some actual ancient documents, handed them to Pryor.

Pryor looked at them with growing excitement. It was a planet charter, beyond question, granted some two centuries before by Interplanetary Control, the predecessor of Interstellar Control. It stated that Arnold MacRae, Ian Stephenson and Alexandra Hamilton had purchased, in goods, cash and services, the full rights to Rigel IV, hereafter to be known as Nevis. It added that the rights were to run in perpetuity, save only in the case of interstellar war and then only during the existence of a state of war.

Somebody had slipped when Marshal Wellington Smith selected Rigel IV for his planet-busting test. Pryor suspected the listing of this world under Nevis, among the titled planets, rather than as Rigel IV among the untitled, plus the antiquity of the deal and the small size and isolation of the settlement, had caused the error.

He stood up, noting that the floor seemed to slant where it had been level when he entered. He said, "There's been a serious error, I fear. Can you have me driven to my ship at once? I must report it while there is still time."

"Certainly, young man," said the Dominie, rising.

Back in Lab Able, Pryor ran his hands over his face, which felt unreasonably hot. He punched in the outspeaker, called the *Erebus* and explained the situation. At its conclusion, he added innocently, "Shall I call in Interstellar for checking and aid? Over."

He had to wait almost half an hour, Earth-time, for the reply to come through. In the meantime, he could picture the consternation among the smug brass hats on the flagship. He hummed the Antarean ditty again, feeling strangely relaxed and comfortable.

Finally it came through. When he got it unscrambled, it was orders to sit tight while higher au-

thority dealt with the situation. He signed off, chuckling, and went back outside to the ancient surface-car, where the young man and a young woman were waiting for him. He had left the message recorder on, resolved to return in two hours for further orders. If there were none, he was going to call in IC. Come what might, he was back in the big picture with a vengeance.

When they reached the Dominie's house, the girl said, "When you're through eating, perhaps you'll come to the kirk vestry. We'll be having a small dance."

He looked at her more closely and, in spite of the rosy and unnatural whiteness of her skin, noted that she was comely. He resolved to visit the kirk vestry as soon as politeness would permit, whatever a kirk vestry might be.

He drank more of the Dominie's uisquebaugh before dinner and found himself asking, "Pardon me, sir, but would you answer one question?" And, at the older man's nod, "Why are you so few?"

"We are few by choice," was the reply. "Our forefathers long ago left Earth for Proxima Centauri Seven, in one of the earliest migrations, to escape overcrowding. My people and I like room to breathe in, room to roam and work without restriction. When PC Seven grew too crowded, we pooled our resources and purchased this world. In those days, planets such as this were cheap enough. The Control was glad to have them settled. Since then, we have limited our numbers to avoid a repetition of what went before."

Thinking of a life spent in the crowded cities of crowded planets or in the cramped quarters of starships, Pryor understood. It had been in search of space and freedom that he had joined the service —only to exchange urban jamming for the prisons of strict discipline and limited space.

"You've created a dream," Pryor said.

The Dominie put down his empty mug and said gravely, "Don't think it's been easy. Adapting to the most hospitable alien world is a backbreaking job. But we've never been afraid of work."

"I can see that," said Pryor, feeling oddly useless. He wondered how he would fare without buttons to push, circuits to serve him.

The Dominie's wife, a tall, handsome woman with the frame of a percheron, appeared and announced that dinner was ready. Thanks to the whiskey, or perhaps to his absorption in his exotic surroundings, Pryor found himself actually eating meat—and actually enjoying it. The mutton was crisp and black on the outside, tender and pink in the center, and the vegetables and fruits served with it constituted a rich new experience.

During the meal, the Dominie's

wife said, "Tell me, Mr. Pryor, if the universe is not at war, why do they wish to blow up our planet?"

Pryor explained as best he could —and, unexpectedly, he seemed to be thinking and expressing himself more clearly than ever before. He told them about the rise of the aggressive elements in Sirius Sector, about the plebescite that had put Wellington Smith in power.

"They're fretting under the restrictions of IC," he said, "and they're seeking to gather sufficient strength to obtain concessions. As long as they remain within IC limits, they can't be touched."

The Dominie said quietly, "It's the same dreadful story, Mary. Too many people, too many unhappy people, restlessness, conspiracy, war. This time the whole universe will suffer." Then, to Pryor, "But if your Star Marshal obliterates an inhabited IC planet, he'll be in trouble, will he not?"

"If he should dare do such a thing—and I feel sure he won't," said Pryor, "he'll be as good as ruined." For some reason he added, as an afterthought, "That is, if IC hears of it."

"I see," said the patriarch, nodding thoughtfully.

His wife said, "There's a dance in the kirk vestry this evening, Mr. Pryor. I hope you'll be in attendance. Naturally, you'll honor us by being our guest overnight."

Pryor found the kirk vestry without trouble. It was an extension of the big building with the white spire and less than fifty meters from the Dominie's house. He intended merely to get someone to drive him to his ship and get his message out. But when he heard the shrill, rhythmic combination of bagpipes and fiddle, something stirred deep in his ancestral memory and he forgot about all else.

He danced with the girl of the surface-car and she showed him the steps of the strange dances and his feet had magic in them. He laughed with the men and drank more of the whiskey and the night became a golden whirl of primitive excitement such as he had never known. He needed the help of two of the young men to get him back to the Dominie's house, where he was undressed and put into a soft warm object they called a bed.

He knew no more until the concussion of the explosion brought him sharply out of his drunken slumber. Although his tongue was thick with fur and his head rattled as if it were filled with dried pebbles, he woke up sober.

Through the bedroom window, he saw the flickering brilliance of the exploded bomb mounting slowly toward the stars. He turned and, with a strange sickness in his stomach, scrambled into his clothing. Outside, he could hear the little community coming to life.

He hadn't believed they would do it. When he got out of the ve-

hicle, he saw an odd little mound of molten metal where Lab Able had stood in silver serenity a few minutes earlier. Silently, he cursed the ruthless militarists who were going to blast Rigel IV to dust, and cursed his own irresponsibility for not sending the message that would have put a halt to their plans.

Somebody said in the odd accent that was already becoming familiar, "What happened, Mr. Pryor?"

Pryor thought fast though his head ached badly. He said, "I fear the drive fuel reached critical mass. It happens once in a hundred thousand times." It hadn't, it couldn't, but how could he tell them they were as good as dead.

And himself with them, of course. But he didn't waste time thinking about that.

When he got back to the Dominie's house, the wife greeted him gravely. She wore a soft wool robe, and her hair was in odd wisps of paper, and he could tell by the way she looked at him that she knew.

"Where can I find the Dominie?" he asked.

"He's in the basement of the kirk," she said in her soft untroubled voice. "He asked me to ask you to join him there."

"Thanks, ma'am," Pryor replied. There was nothing more to say.

The light was dim in the basement. The place smelled of age and dampness. But there was machinery there, a vast pile of it, and the Dominie was fussing around it, wearing a frown.

"Ho, there, Pryor," he said. "So they blew up your ship?"

"They blew her up," said Pryor grimly. "I never thought they'd dare. If only I hadn't made an idiot of myself at the dance, I'd—"

The Dominie cut him off with, "It's a bit late for regrets, young man. Come see if we can get this blasted communicator working."

Pryor's heart leapt. For a moment, he thought he was gaining a reprieve. Then he saw the age and condition of the old set—it was at least a century old—and realized they'd be lucky to get a message out at all before the big one blew them to nothingness.

"Come on, Dominie," he said, "let's have that wrench."

They worked through the short night and into the morning that followed. The Dominie's wife brought them a strange herb brew she called tea, that reinvigorated them. She said, to Pryor, "Sheila and the other girls are very excited. They believe you'll be staying a while now. You'll be the first stranger in many years."

Pryor wiped his brow grimly and said, "Well, I'll be here as long as any of them, I guess."

"Then there's no hope?" the Dominie asked quietly over his tea.

"Oh, we'll get a message out to the IC," said Pryor. "We're almost ready to send. But it will

be too late. The bomb is already on its way."

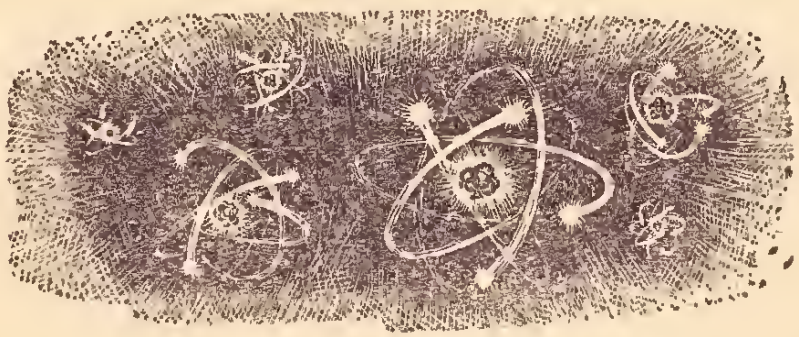
"Come on then," said the Dominie, handing his tea back to his wife. "Let's waste no time."

They got the message out, before the reddish sun reached the Meridian. And Pryor said grimly, "That makes their second mistake. They should have blasted the town last night, not just my ship. Their first mistake was in selecting this planet." He looked about him at the placid, happy scene, and suppressed a heaving sob.

The Dominie put a firm hand on his shoulder and said, "Perhaps it's best this way. Perhaps this is why we are here, to prevent the most terrible war of all. After all, there aren't many of us against those who would die if your marshal got his way."

Pryor said,, his eyes shining with admiration, "You're a great man, Dominie—and a brave one."

"Let's just say an old one," said the patriarch. "And now, since we have so little time, let's you and I walk to the edge of the loch and look at the hills on the other side. It's a lovely view."



If you like your science fantasy made exciting by a chessboard kind of wizardry—if dangerous animals and big game hunters and hunters of men *on a canvas as mysteriously wide and deep as the universe gives you a very special kind of thrill—you've put your finger on one reason why you can't afford to miss Stanley Mullen's grippingly suspenseful short lead novel,* THE LAIR OF THE PHOENIX, *in our very next issue. And the other reasons are legion, including the Copperbirds' ability to recreate and rebuild life in a cosmic drama that runs the gamut from night on Venus to the stellar immensities. Few writers in the science fantasy field can excel Stanley Mullen in his own astounding domain of wonder, star-girt and untrammeled.*

universe in books

by . . . Hans Stefan Santesson

Our doughty critic warrior enters the lists for flying saucers — and the newest Ted Sturgeon volume.

VAUGHAN WILKINS, author of "And so—Victoria," "Fanfare for a Witch," and other important novels, now turns to fantasy in his literate and appealing VALLEY BEYOND TIME (St. Martin's Press, $3.00), firm in his belief that there can be shadings in fantasy and that it needn't always echo our fears and our frustrations, now and in the future. This is fantasy in that older tradition which did not have to play upon the memories of a world suddenly discovering, not without fear and trembling, that it is uncomfortably close to disaster. Our social satirists and the devotees of the space opera, in and outside of fantasy, will find this dull stuff. But some of you will, I feel, agree with me that Vaughan Wilkins, in taking us to Cibola, the Island of the Valley of the Ever-Young, has taken us into another and a very inviting dimension where time, as we know it, stands still, and other values seem more important.

What will be *your* theory about "this peculiar denudative phenomenon"? What will be your thoughts

A recent Air Force proclamation denying the existence of flying saucers and offering proof that the alleged "sightings" stem largely from mass hysteria has prompted Mr. Santesson to add fuel to a raging controversy. And while we do not ourselves share his conviction that the Keyhoe books are on the winning side of the argument we remain unshaken in our adherence to the Voltairian precept: "We do not agree with what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it." And Mr. Santesson never merely tilts at windmills.

as the old man sweeps the strings of the harp, and "is answered by a silver fanfare of trumpets, echoed and re-doubled in the high vaulting of the wood"?

And will you share the reactions of Senator Benaiah Purvis, resplendent in his mantle of purple and tunic of scarlet, as he hears the song of the bells there in the hall of the kings of Derga—"small silver bells, whose piercing, mournful sweetness grew to such an intensity that the mind was emptied of all sensation except an agonized ecstasy in their music, and that the very fibres of the body seemed to be set vibrating to the waves of almost intolerably lovely sound?" In time, the Senator and the Queen go "beyond time, in great glory," and Ethne, daughter of the King of Cibola, returns to the Valley Beyond Time—as does Midge. It is not inconceivable that some of you—more than a few of you—will wish they could go with them . . . Recommended!

MAJOR DONALD E. KEYHOE, who needs no introduction to the field by now, is responsible for another interesting and potentially controversial contribution to the literature of the Flying Saucers. Keyhoe's THE FLYING SAUCER CONSPIRACY (Henry Holt, $3.50) is important, doubly so at the moment, when it is necessary for us to pause and evaluate the mounting evidence that there are Intelligences directing the Saucers. A very personal reaction is that both Keyhoe and others might be more effective if they organized their facts and their notes, historical and contemporary, a shade differently. There are slightly disconcerting jumps back and forth across time and space which could confuse the general reader.

But Major Keyhoe's report on the top-level blackout which for several years has imposed a stern censorship of flying saucer reports is topical and priority reading. However justified such thinking may have seemed, it is beginning to be obvious that the censorship which has meant that only a handful know—or even suspect—what the Saucers can mean to us, is not only regrettable but could conceivably be fatal. For it implies an alarming higher-echelon lack of faith in our reactions and our thinking that is, to say the least, disturbing.

It is true that even in our time we have seen waves of know-nothingism, and there is reason to believe that, after an Atomic War, we may very well seek to turn the clock back in a mass effort to shut our eyes. But now—right now—we have the heroism and the courage of the past generations to add strength to our heritage, and to forget this is regrettable. We do not yet have a Statist society, with the State—in its various forms—thinking for us. The blind censorship of Flying Saucer reports, by rote and from mixed feelings, seems part and parcel of a school

of thought which half-anticipates the prophetic extrapolations of writers who have appeared elsewhere in this magazine.

The blow by blow account of the campaign to muzzle Major Keyhoe answers questions like these—in addition to reporting hundreds of sightings.

Is it a fact that "one of the big ones" is orbiting us?

Our Earth Satellite Vehicle program had been announced by Defense Secretary Forrestal in 1948. "The Pentagon then also confirmed a Nazi scheme for a deadly 'sky platform.'" What has happened since then?

Did we succeed in bombing the Moon?

Is it true that the Air Force is now receiving 700 flying saucer reports *a week*?

Are there oases on Mars?

What about that twelve-mile-long bridge on the Moon?

Have the Saucers carried off jet planes?

What does it all add up to? Does Washington know what the Saucers are? If so, you may agree with Major Keyhoe that "they're wrong to hide what they've learned. No matter what the explanation is, the world should be prepared."

ATTENTION writers! Damon Knight, Judith Merril and James Blish are making tentative plans for a science fiction writers' conference to be held this summer in Milford, Pa. Milford is a small resort town about 90 miles from New York. Dates, prices, etc., have not been settled, and reservations are not wanted now. What *is* wanted, if you are interested, is a letter telling something about yourself—experience, training, stories sold (if any), and so on. Later progress reports on the conference will go out directly to qualified people who write NOW to Damon Knight, P.O. Box 164, Milford, Pike County, Pa.

Ballantine Books again bring us an anthology of material by an important SF writer that, though not exactly Science Fiction, must be mentioned in this column. Theodore Sturgeon's CAVIAR (Ballantine, 35 cents) is an interesting group of stories by the winner of the International Fantasy Award. Several are representative of Sturgeon's ability to at times write with a sensitivity and a subtlety that should make his work remembered in that future we all look forward to with such mixed feelings. "Bright Segment" is a beautiful portrait of a man who lived with aloneness, emptiness and uselessness. "Shadow, Shadow on the Wall," is excellent. Recommended.

There have been several inquiries about "Fantasy Times," referred to in earlier columns. A free sample copy of the current issue of the periodical—science fiction's own newspaper—will be sent to any reader of FANTASTIC UNIVERSE upon request. Drop a postcard to-

night to FANDOM HOUSE, P.O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, New Jersey.

E. EVERETT EVANS returns to the adventures of George Hanlon, Secret Operative of the Inter-Stellar Corps, in ALIEN MINDS (Fantasy Press, $3.00). The people of Szstruyyah — "Estrella" to the Corpsmen — are native to that world, and the first "advanced enough to be asked to join the Federation with equal status." Until they make their influence felt pro-Federation, administrative and popular thinking is wavering under pressure from inflammatory speeches and whispering campaigns, all calling for keeping Estrella for the Estrellans and running out all "plundering foreigners." Young Hanlon, with his gift for reading men's minds—and entering into the minds of others—is the obvious choice in the campaign to discover who or what is behind the attempt to discredit the Federation. ALIEN MINDS, to quote the jacket blurb, is "*not* a novel heavy with social significance; it is *not* a psychological study of alien—or human—entities." Frankly "written to entertain," it achieves its purpose admirably.



A master of documentary-type realism captures the steel-fire glitter of tall men and a darkly imperiled ship in the gulfs between the planets

ON THE AVERAGE

By FRANK B. BRYNING

in the next FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

vacation on earth

by . . . Richard E. Lowe

The Earthians were horribly split up internally. But Kcid took a man's delight in inhabiting them.

THE BODY *of a man lay on the bed. He appeared to be sleeping, although an experienced finger would have found almost no pulse, and a practiced ear would have detected only the feeblest breathing. Life in the body of the prone figure was at a low ebb.*

Slowly, seemingly out of the very head itself, a haze began to ooze—a gray, filmy, foggy vapor which grew thicker and thicker, spreading out until the man's face was totally obscured.

The haze assumed shape and even a kind of substance, and when it had formed into a long, oval mass, it began to float across the room.

It settled down in the seat of a large upholstered chair, almost as if it were trying, humanlike, to make itself comfortable.

After a moment the mass of gray vapor began to glow, first with a dull orange tint gradually brightening to red, then into purple and finally into a luminous green. Tiny points of light began to flash inside it, and then one sudden, stabbing beam leaped out of the glowing hazy stuff. It passed swift-

The occupation of a human body by an alien intelligence is surely the most elastic theme in the entire range of present-day science fiction. It can either be grim and terrifying, or it can bounce the reader right out of his chair with a rollicking, if documentarily stark, smash climax. Our space helmet is off to Richard E. Lowe for a most distinguished SF thought variant.

ly up through the ceiling and beyond into the sky, and continued its incredible journey, out into the great empty reaches of space . . .

The green fog in the bedroom chair began to pulse, throbbing slowly in and out like a gaseous bellows, while the little lights began to flicker irregularly. Then a new light came—a sharp blue point of light lancing down the beam from the sky—and with its coming the pulsing stopped, the green slowly faded and only the tiny flickers of light remained.

Out of the living fog thoughts had come and flashed with incredible speed up the beam of now invisible light. Contact had been established . . .

THIS IS KCID. (the thoughts ran). Do you catch me?

"We catch you," came the answer, after a long moment. "Your signal is clear, but weak. Go ahead."

Okay, Arck (the thoughts continued). But let's dispense with two-way transmission now. I've never communicated over this distance before and it's a terrible strain.

I arrived on Planet III, System II—they call it Earth—as scheduled, but had some difficulty finding Adab. I've been here a full Earth-year now, and have to admit Adab's earlier report was right in most details, thought faulty in many of its conclusions. Here's the picture as I see it.

First, Earth would not be suitable for us to live on in our present physical form, and as you know the gaseous state is highly unsatisfactory except for short periods. Therefore, the only way we could profitably colonize Earth would be by occupying the inhabitants, as Adab did and as I have done on several occasions.

In fact, at this moment I have an Earth body in suspension, waiting for me to come back. The catch is, if I don't get back within a few Earth-hours, the body will die and I'll have to occupy someone else.

Adab was right in his measurement of Earth time. Their year is equal to one-tenth of our *glb*. But the life span of Earth people is only some sixty or seventy years, or less than a twelfth the span of life on Artex IV.

In many ways Earth is the most pleasant planet I have yet scouted. The people are certainly a higher form of life than the five-legged beasts of *Monsto*, though perhaps not so advanced emotionally as the *aalbs* of *Ticat* in System XVII.

The Earth people have a certain degree of intelligence, but it is paradoxical in many respects. It is not a one-race world. There are beings here with an intelligence quotient lower than that of our own *ggg's*, if you can believe it.

On the other hand, there have been perhaps a few hundred instances in the history of this world of individuals with almost superintelligence.

Earth is on the threshold of what it calls the atomic age, but so far only two ways have been found of using that lower form of energy: for destruction in the form of bombs, and as a means of creating heat for the generation of steam used in propulsion of enormous land and sea vessels or the creation of electric power.

There is some talk of atom-powered aircraft, which would require some form of direct transmission of energy, but so far as I can discover at present, Earthians are still exulting over the conquest of the sound barrier.

It may well be centuries before they discover the secret of the aural barrier which will enable them, as it did us, to travel faster than the speed of light. Therefore I do not believe we need be concerned with the possibility of an invasion from Earth in the foreseeable future.

These Earthians are strange, yet somehow wonderful people. Their way of life, though still primitive, has many pleasant aspects. Adab's experience is a case in point.

I had some difficulty locating him when I first arrived, for he was in occupation, and it is difficult to send and receive in that condition.

But I finally located him one night when he came out of his captive's head for a brief moment of relaxation, and managed to worm out of him why he had been silent for so long.

It seems that he had occupied what Earthians call "a married man," and had become so pleasurably adjusted to Earth life that he completely ignored his duties to Artex IV. I would have been much more severe with Adab if he had been older and more experienced, and also if I had not myself already discovered this insidious liking for Earth ways which seems to come over us when we occupy an Earth body.

When Adab gets back, I suggest you send him to Circle VII for a tour of duty. It will settle him down.

However, the startling thing about Earth people, and the one presenting our biggest difficulty in terms of colonizing this planet, is this: Earthians have not one, but two minds!

The first, which Adab and I have now had some experience in occupying, is called the conscious mind. It apparently controls the thoughts and actions of an individual, yet not so completely that it can be stated as an infallible rule.

The second mind is called the sub-, or unconscious mind. I am not yet sure whether this is a physical mind. But it appears to have no relation to any of the nerves in the brain, for I have not been able to establish control of it. It seems to have strange and almost unlimited powers and is in no way subject to the control of the first, or conscious mind.

This may be hard for you to comprehend, for as you know, a phenomenon of this kind has

never occurred elsewhere in the universe, at least to our knowledge.

But try to imagine that you have a second mind. You do not use it or feel it or even know it is there. But suppose that one day you suddenly committed an act of treason against Artex IV, some act which was contrary to every bit of training you had ever received, an act for which there appeared to be no logical explanation whatever.

On Earth this would be explained, in a rather unsatisfying and complex way, as follows: At some time in your youth, you had suffered an indignity at the hands of the government—or perhaps it happened to your parents or someone else close to you. You had forgotten about it completely—you thought. But your subconscious mind had remembered, and in its own good time would take control, and cause you to commit this treacherous act.

Incredible as it may sound, on Earth there are many, many formidably guarded buildings devoted exclusively to the forcible detention of people whose subconscious minds have thus taken control of their bodies. These unfortunate ones are called "insane," a word which has no equivalent in our language since we lack that facet of the Earthians' emotional make-up.

Adab and I have both had frightening experiences with this subconscious mind. When he first came here he occupied the body of a judge, a dignified and honorable man. But only a few days later, to his complete horror, Adab found himself—as the judge—wielding a sharp-edged tool on his—or rather the judge's—wife.

Not then understanding what had happened, Adab of course fled the judge's body. I later read accounts of the affair in some printed journals called newspapers. They said the judge had apparently gone temporarily insane, murdered his wife, and then died of heart failure. I am sorry Adab did not stay in the judge until he learned what had really caused the incident. It would have given us valuable knowledge.

I myself had a similar experience—again involving a woman! —though not a tragic one.

The second person I occupied on Earth was a young man, a traveling vendor of household goods. As I got adjusted to his mind and memorized his thought and memory patterns, I set about his business. It seemed like a good way to meet and study many people. At one of the houses where I stopped, the lady who came to the door seemed to know me quite well.

While I was bringing up the man's memories of her, she put her arms around my neck and plated her lips against mine. Then the curious thing occurred. The physical sensation—they call it a "kiss" —was really not unpleasant, and the brain patterns by then were ably informing me as to what was

taking place. But suddenly, without any conscious thought, I pushed the lady away, turned and walked out. She called some quite frightful names after me.

I now realize that the man had probably disliked this woman intensely, despite her physical appeal for him, and his subconscious mind had chosen that moment to repudiate her. He proved to be an unsatisfactory vehicle, living on a very low intellectual level, and I was forced to discard him shortly thereafter.

We will have to do a lot of research on this problem of the two minds, for we do not have enough agents to risk their having to change bodies simply as a result of unforeseeable occurrences. It may be that there are Earth people whose two minds are in perfect accord. If so, the job will be to discover how to identify them.

In fact, the body I am now occupying may be such a one. I captured the man a few weeks ago, and since then several events have taken place which lead me to believe I am on the right track. But we should hold off plans for large-scale colonization for a while yet. It would be foolhardy not to.

Now I am going to make an unusual request. As you know, it has been several *glbs* since I have had any time off. So I'm hereby applying for an official leave—I have quite a bit accrued, you know—of perhaps half a *glb*.

I plan to spend it on Earth. I shall be able to do a lot of valuable work, but I need a relief from the official pressure.

I can't maintain this contact any longer. The transmission from Earth to Artex IV is the longest I've ever attempted, and it is quite fatiguing . . .

The flickering lights went out and the gray mass seemed to sink inward on itself. Then, with a start, it darted across the room and surrounded the head of the man on the bed. In a moment, it had absorbed itself into the head and was out of sight.

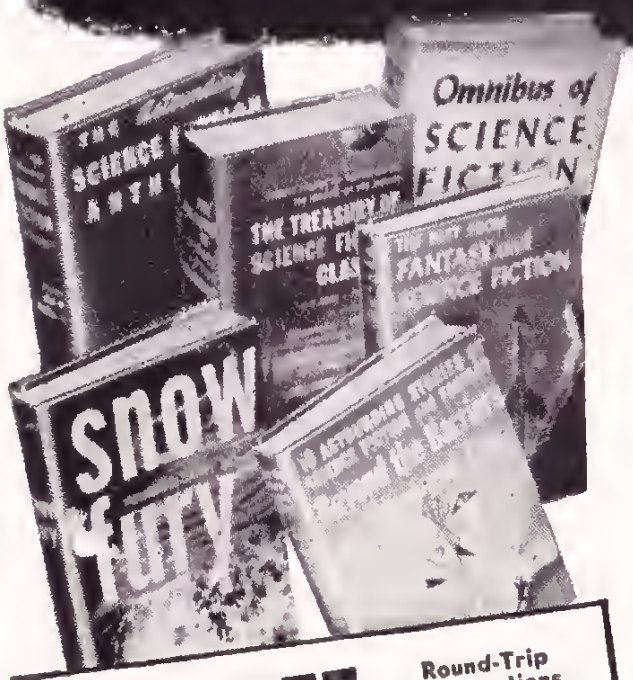
The man stirred. He opened his eyes slowly, stretched, and raised himself on one elbow.

He glanced at his bride, sleeping now quietly beside him. She was honey-haired and delicately curved and a small sleep-smile lay on her full, passionate lips.

"This," the man said softly to himself, "is going to be some vacation."

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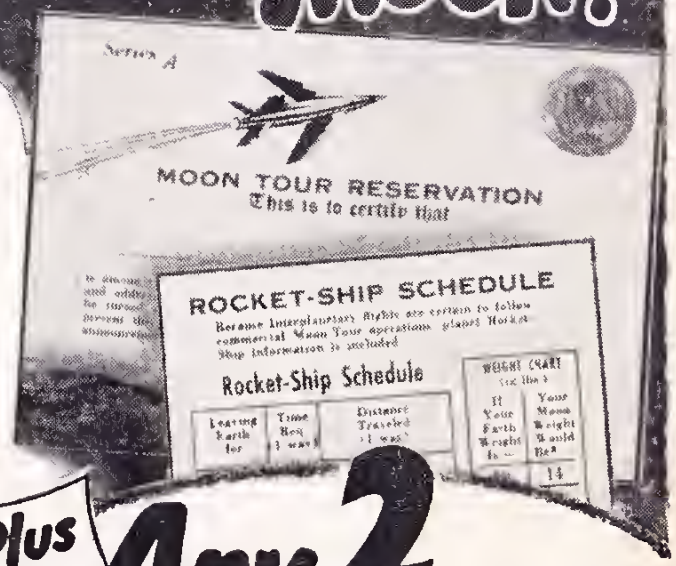
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